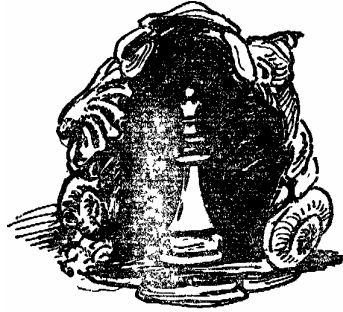


LEV KASSIL

THE BLACK BOOK AND SCHWAMBRANIA

PART TWO



SCHWAMBRANIA



THE SCHWAMBRANIAN REVOLUTION

THE VOYAGE OF THE BRENABOR



The Schwambranian Fleet set out on a great voyage around the continent in order to chart the exact boundaries of Schwambrania. The ships set sail in the middle of 1916 and did not dock until November 1917. The significance of this voyage in the history of Schwambrania was great, indeed, as can be seen from the documents which have come down to us. My Schwambranian archive contains a detailed map of Schwambrania and the log of the flagship *Brenabor*. There is no sense quoting it in full here, as it is very long and rather dull. Today's readers will find many of its pages hard to understand. That is why the account of the voyage is given in a revised and abridged form and some things are explained in parenthesis. I have tried to retain the Schwambranian style of writing wherever possible.

I would also like to explain the following:

At the time in question, Brenabor Case IV was the Emperor of Schwambrania. We borrowed the name completely from a well-known ad of the day. That was when two automobiles were added to the coat of arms of Schwambrania, although it already boasted the Schwambranian wisdom tooth, the Black Queen, Keeper of the Secret, and the ship of Jack, the Sailor's Companion.



King Brenabor No. 4 was a rather easy-going fellow. Still and all, he was a monarch, and none of us wanted to be him. Then again, we didn't want to be plain commoners, either. That was when Brenabor adopted us. We decided he had picked us up at sea when we were very little. The vicious old Chatelains

Urodena had put us, new-born, into an empty sauerkraut barrel and had tossed us into the sea. King Brenabor was out rowing when he got a whiff of stale cabbage and rescued us.

At that time nearly every children's story had an orphan in it. A tale about an adopted child was both fashionable and touching. As for the smell of stale cabbage, that did not in any way make us less attractive, for many parents insisted that all children, and not only adopted ones, were found in cabbage patches.

The squadron was made up of the following ships: the flagship *Brenabor*, *Beef Stroganoff*, the *Jules Verne*, the *Liquid Metal*, the *Prince Courant*, the *Cascara Sagrada*, the *Gratis*, the *Valiant*, the *Gambit*, and the *Donnerwetter*. Despite his youth, Admiral and Captain Ardelar Case, meaning me, was in command of the squadron. Oska was the Vice-Admiral and Chief Able-Bodied Seaman. His name was Satanrex. The name was of operatic origin. The local druggist often sang at our home musicales. He had a deep basso and sang Mephistopheles' aria, which included the words "Satan wreaks his vengeance there". He ran his words together when he sang, and so the first two words sounded like "Satanrex". Oska kept asking everyone who Satanrex was.

Jack, the Sailor's Companion, was our faithful guardian at sea.

DEPARTURE

Page 1 of Admiral Ardelar Case's diary began as follows: "The sun rose in the morning and shone above the horizon. The view of the sea was very beautiful. A hundred thousand soldiers and a million people were there to see us off. A brass band was blasting away, and it was a regular manifestation. New Schlyamburg was all illustrated (This is an error. The admiral wanted to say "illuminated"). I had on a pair of white bell-bottom flannel trousers, white shoes and spurs, a starched collar, a light-blue bow tie, a long-waisted purple Circassian coat with gold cartridge slots and epaulets, a short crimson cape lined with a tiger-skin and a captain's cap with a plume. I led the way. I was tall and lithe."

The ships were moored at the pier. The second whistle had sounded. The stevedores were busy loading pastries and thousands of tubes of strawberry jelly.

The Navy-passenger dreadnought *Brenabor* was so huge that street cars and hacks coursed back and forth along the deck, charging twenty kopecks to take you from the stern to the bow, although oats were very cheap in Schwambrania. The *Brenabor's* six stacks smoked like six huge fires. It had a ten thousand camel-power whistle, and its masts were so high they were always capped with snow.

"Attention in the engine room!" I said.

"Stand by!" Jack, the Sailor's Companion, said. "Steh fertig bei der Machine!"

The tsar was there to see us off. He climbed up on a barrel and said the following manifesto:

"Yo-ho-ho, ye Schwambranian knights in shining armour! We, by the Grace of God, Emperor of Schwambrania, Tsar of Caldonia, Balvonia et cetera, et cetera, command you to have a bon voyage both ways. If you happen to see a war anyplace, get right into the fight and slash away! Give the enemy their comeuppance. Men! All the centuries, as many as there were and will be, are looking down on you from the tops of these masts! Forward march, my friends, on your voyage! Bugles, blare a song of victory! And be sure to go below deck if you get caught in a squall or a storm so's you won't catch cold. Forward, fearless knights! Off to the rolling seas, heading southwest. God bless us and Godspeed!"

At this, everyone burst into the Schwambranian anthem, composed by the Vice-Admiral, and having all the stresses on the first syllable:

*"Hoo-ray, hoo-ray!" they all shouted,
The Schwambranians.
"Hoo-ray, hoo-ray!" they were clouted!
Do-re-mi-mans.
But not one of them was murdered,
All of them survived.
And they blasted all the others.
Lo! They're strong and live!*

The *Brenabor* sounded its ten thousand camel-power whistle for the third time. Riders tumbled, and their horses galloped off. Anyone standing was now sitting. Anyone sitting was now lying. As for those that had been lying, there wasn't much else they could do. The ships cast off. The voyage had begun.

"Don't forget to write!" the tsar shouted.

The squadron was going full steam ahead. The pennants fluttered in the breeze. The tall, sleek *Brenabor* led the caravan, going a hundred knots an hour. The wind was blowing up. The waves churned. The sun went down in the evening.

THE BATTLE OF CHARADE

The voyage was progressing well, with the sun coming up in the morning and going down in the evening. If we are to believe the Admiral's log, the wind

was becoming stronger with each passing day. The squadron did not drop anchor at Port Manteau and passed Cape Gialmar, coming round the tip of Cacophonia and Cape Rugby as it headed for Drandzonsk. A small, single-breasted ship was sent out to meet us (Another error. Suits are single-breasted, not ships.), and the people of Drandzonsk offered us Triumph cigarettes. We stopped for a smoke and continued on our way. Two days later we dropped anchor in Medusa Harbour.

Vast, masculine forests stretched off into the distance beyond Medusa (Naturally, there are no such forests. One sometimes speaks of a virgin forest, but the admiral was a woman-hater.). There, in the masculine forests, we hunted wild rum toddies. The rum toddies were animals we had discovered in an ad of the well known Shustov Distilleries. Rum toddies were not to be found in any other country except Schwambrania. They had the head of a buffalo and the body of a horse, so that they both kicked and butted. They were ferocious.

Then Satanrex and I explored the Cor-i-Dor Desert. Everything was deserted in the desert. Meanwhile, the squadron under Jack, the Sailor's Companion rounded Cape Pudding and steamed into Balvonsk. We boarded our ship again and continued on our way. The Piliguinian Fleet was sighted off Cape Charade, with the vile cad, Count Chatelains Urodenal, in command.

"Ah, main royal yard!" Jack, Sailor's Companion, cursed. "Fore royal standin backstay! Unter lissel left and right, too! Plombiren Sie die Schiffsraume! Seal the holds!" And he began to flash his eyes. Chatelains Urodenal picked up his megaphone and declared war on us. A battle at sea followed. Our ships and their ships attacked each other and tried to send over boarding parties. What followed was a regular Trafalgar, which ended as our Waterloo. The *Liquid Metal*, *Donnerwetter* and the *Boef a la Stroganoff* were all sunk, and the others were towed off by the Piliguinians. They took them off to their prison, which was on Garlandia, a desert island in the Arsenic Ocean. Our valiant *Brenabor* was the only ship that did not surrender to the enemy and managed to break through the fiery circle. The lone vessel, its sails billowing, sped across the ocean blue. There was an island in that ocean. It was a bleak granite island without a sign of life. It was named Punishment Isle and was a part of the Liverpill Archipelago. Cape Comer was on that island and there, in a seashell grotto, the Black Queen lived. We dropped anchor. The Queen did not look bad, although she was a bit mouldy.



Then we passed the dangerous islands of Quinine, Biomalt, Cocoa and Codlive-roil. As we drew alongside Cape Colt, we sighted the tops of the Overthere Mts. and the inaccessible Peak Puzzle, so we turned westwards and entered Seven Scholars Bay.

We were approaching Elfin Island.

THE FAMOUS PERSONS FOREST RESERVE

The Prince and the Pauper, Max and Moritz, Bobus and Bubus, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Oliver Twist, the Little Women and the Little Men, and when they were grown, Captain Grant's Children, Little Lord Fauntleroy, the Twelve Huntsmen, the Three Spinners, the Seven Wise Scholars, the Thirty-three Knights, who were the nephews of Uncle Chernomor, the Last Day of Pompeii, and the One Thousand and One Nights all came out to welcome us.

"Long live Your Royal Brilliance!" they shouted.

There was a green oak on the island. And a gold chain on the oak. A puss-in-boots walked round and round it, looking very wise. When he went to the right, he would read a book out loud, and when he went to the left, he would turn on a gramophone. Just like Durov's famous circus animals. A sphinx sat on the top of a cliff, making up riddles and charades.

Familiar characters from many books lived here, for Elfin Island was a forest preserve for all the famous characters we had ever read about. They lived here out of time and place.

A large company was riding towards us, led by the Mysterious Knight with his visor down. Next came the Headless Horseman. Don Quixote whipped his old nag on, with his faithful sword-bearer Sancho Panza trotting along on a donkey. Sancho was carrying some windmill slats that Don Quixote had hacked off some place or other. Then came Ivan the Fool on the Humpbacked Horse. He stuck out his tongue as he rode by. Then came the Three Knights, Ilya Muromets, Alyosha Popovich and Dobrynya Nikitich on their three mighty steeds. The horses were harnessed to the Tsar-Cannon. Nat Pinkerton, the well-

known detective, crept along in their wake. He was looking for the Mysterious Knight and was being shadowed by the famous detective, Sherlock Holmes.

A man with long hair and a long beard and clothed in animal skins appeared from behind some bushes. A wise old parrot was perched on his shoulder. The parrot was plucking fortune cards from his master's pocket.

"Rrrr-robinson Crr-rusoe!" the parrot squawked.

We recognized the great hermit. Following Robinson was a savage carrying several parcels. He was completely naked. He didn't have on any pants at all. All he had on was a calendar leaf for a loincloth. The word written on the page was:

"Friday". At the sight of us Robinson begged our pardon and asked Don Quixote to lend him his shaving basin, which Don Quixote did. Robinson went off to shave, while Friday, having stopped to gossip with Sancho Panza and ask his advice about something, ran off to put on some clothes in a house with a sign outside that read:

ORDERS FILLED
Ladies and Men's
Valiant Little Tailor
Sews seven cloaks at a stroke

"They mean us," the Seven Wise Scholars said.

That evening our visit was marked by a gala fete and fireworks in the Mysterious Garden. Bluebirds and Blue Herons were there. Golden Cockerels crowed, and geese laid golden eggs, while squirrels whistled popular tunes.

We were there, too, and drank mead with the rest, but since we had no moustaches, it did not flow down our chests.

THE SUNSET WAS CANCELLED

The days of the festivities coincided with the first days of the revolution Russia. Reality was wonderful. It turned everything about us topsy-turvy. The following telegram was received from Schwambrania:

The people of Schwambrania are worried. Indignant over the Battle of Charade. Brenabor partially abdicated. Chatelains Urodenal temporary ruler.

Half an hour later the *Brenabor*, having sealed the holds and raised the red flag, sailed at full steam off to the Brightasday Sea. We passed Lilliputia, Shellacputia, Port Folio and Getamoveonio. We rechristened our ship. It was now the *Carshandar and Jupiter*. The crew was all for the republic and had

renounced the traitor of a tsar. After all, Brenabor No. 4 had temporarily installed the villian Chatelains Urodenal in order to preserve his crown. Urodenal's troops were guarding the Hopscotch Plateau, having dug in along the Nitty, Plotzky and Socko-Pocko canyons. We had no choice but to press on towards the Candelabra Mountains. There, in the northern foothills, the republican conspirators were hiding out in the environs of Port Rait. We took them on board. Then, rounding Cape Clock and bypassing Knuckle duster, we sailed for the free shores of Carshandar, dropping anchor in Port Yippee. The Carshandarians welcomed us with open arms. Carshandar was enveloped in a revolutionary uprising. Urodenal's landing party was only able to take Condora. We set siege to Condora from the Lilac Sea. Condora fell. We absconded with great riches. Then, passing Cape Rick-Rack and Cape Billbock, we stopped off at Port Ico, and finally dropped anchor on the Carshandar Riviera. I changed my last name and became Ardelar de Carshandar.



In order to prepare a coup on the entire continent, I stowed away in the sealed hold of one of the ships and made my way to New Shiyamburg. I lived in the capital, disguised as an Indian. However, on the very eve of the uprising, Brenabor recognized me by the scar in my left eyebrow. Urodenal had me arrested and brought me before a court martial.

The trial of Admiral de Carshandar lasted a whole day (Sunday). This is how the Admiral described it in his diary:

"The courtroom was full of people who were staring at me with open curiosity. I was in the dock, so handsome and lithe. Four guards had their rifles trained on me, to make sure I didn't escape. The former Brenabor was the chief

justice. He really hated my guts. Count Chatelains Urodenal, black-haired and a cad, was prosecuting me personally.

"There was no brass band at all. Satanrex was my lawyer. They had sworn they wouldn't arrest him or throw him into jail. The prosecutor lied, telling everyone to their face that I was a crook, but my lawyer got even and said that Urodenal was a crook if there ever was one. Then Brenabor said: 'Mr. Prisoner at the Bar! You have five minutes to give them a peace of mind.' Then I rose, so tall and lithe, and the courtroom died down. 'Honourable Judges!' I shouted. 'You are under arrest in the name of the Free Continent of Big Tooth!' In a flashing eye Jack, the Sailor's Companion, dashed into the courtroom with some revolutionaries and they overthrew the tyrants. Everyone cheered, and there was a general ovation."

The admiral did not mention the sunset that day. Apparently, due to the coup, there was a continuous sunrise over Schwambrania.

THE END OF THE BLACK BOOK

I WANT TO ATTEND MEETINGS

All sorts of meetings were being held everywhere, for the grown-ups were quite carried away by politics. My own mother had been elected to the Council of Deputies by the Ladies' Circle. Papa was Vice-Chairman of the new Duma. Since the Duma and the Council were at odds. Papa and Mamma were, too.

I was burning with a desire to enter politics, since T, too, wanted to attend meetings, make speeches and elect candidates. That was when I received a letter from my friend Vitya Expromptov in Saratov. He described his Boy Scout troop in such glorious terms that I decided to organize a branch in my school.

I read whatever I could about scouting. Then one day after classes were over and the boys were buckling their satchels, I climbed onto the lectern and made a long speech.

"Gentlemen, we've had enough of fighting during recesses, playing cards and being disunited. We should band together, that is, like a club.... And we won't lie, smoke or curse. We'll drill, have our own clubroom and hold club meetings. We'll elect a leader, and we'll be young scouts. I mean Boy Scouts. What do you say? Who wants to be a Boy Scout?"

Practically every boy there wanted to be one. The commotion that followed was unimaginable. Nikolai Ilyich looked in to see what was going on. He said that if we didn't stop yelling, he'd have all our names put down in the Ledger before we ever drew up a list of future Boy Scouts.

A THREE-FINGERED SALUTE

The following Sunday the first scout meeting was held in school. To my surprise, there were a great many boys from other grades and even several seniors.

We conducted our meeting just like adults: we stood up and made speeches, and someone kept the minutes.

Two troops were formed. I was elected scout leader. Shalferov, the horse doctor's son, was elected Treasurer, for he was considered to be the most honest of us all.

Our Rules were based on the scout law: we would not smoke, drink, lie or use bad language, but would be courteous, cheerful, do a good deed every day, always smile, and salute our superiors on the street by raising three fingers to our caps. The three fingers stood for the three commandments of the scout oath:

"...to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the scout law." Actually, the Handbook said: "...and my monarch", but we used the alternative "country". There was a hitch as far as God was concerned, for Stepan Atlantis suddenly announced that he was an atheist. We had to convince him that God was actually like your conscience and, anyway. He had only been included to make things sound right. We finally convinced him, and Stepan solemnly raised three fingers and repeated the scout oath. He then promised to stop smoking within a week.

We signed up quite a few parents as sponsors. They donated money which we used to buy a tricoloured flag and an old automobile horn that was missing its rubber bulb. This home-made bugle called for a great amount of wind. It would then produce a loud and horrible sound. Hefty was the only one who had the necessary lung power, and so he was elected bugler. He was flattered and tried his best, blowing so hard it made trucks veer and steamships green with envy.

We were given a room in the local children's library to serve as our clubhouse. By then so many other boys had signed up, we had formed two more troops. I was now a troop leader. Boys saluted me on the street. I felt very proud.

SIR ROBERT, ST. GEORGE AND GOOD DEEDS

All the preparatory work was finally completed. The clubroom was furnished, the flag displayed, the scout promise made, the patrol and troop leaders elected, the scout law learned by heart. Every one of us knew who Lord Baden-Powell was and what St. George had to do with scouting.

However, nobody knew what to do after all of the above had been accomplished. We decided to stage a mock battle between the two troops on granary row, but the watchmen chased us away.

We tried doing good deeds, deciding we would patrol the town and fix street benches and fences, and help old ladies carry their shopping bags. However, schoolboys had a bad reputation in Pokrovsk, and the very first old lady whom Atlantis tried to help began screaming wildly the moment he took hold of her heavy bag. A crowd gathered on the spot. Stepan barely managed to escape.

I then discovered that my fellow-scouts were doing their good deeds in the following manner: they would sneak up to a stout fence in the dark and pry off some boards. The following morning they would appear on the scene as benefactors and mend it with goody-goody expressions. They received ten points at the Good Deed Contest for this.

We soon became very bored with scouting.

There was no use expecting any help from St. George, our heavenly patron. Lord Baden-Powell, wearing a broad-brimmed Boer campaign hat, smiled down at us from the wall portrait. He couldn't suggest anything of interest, either.

Once again the boys began smelling strongly of tobacco.

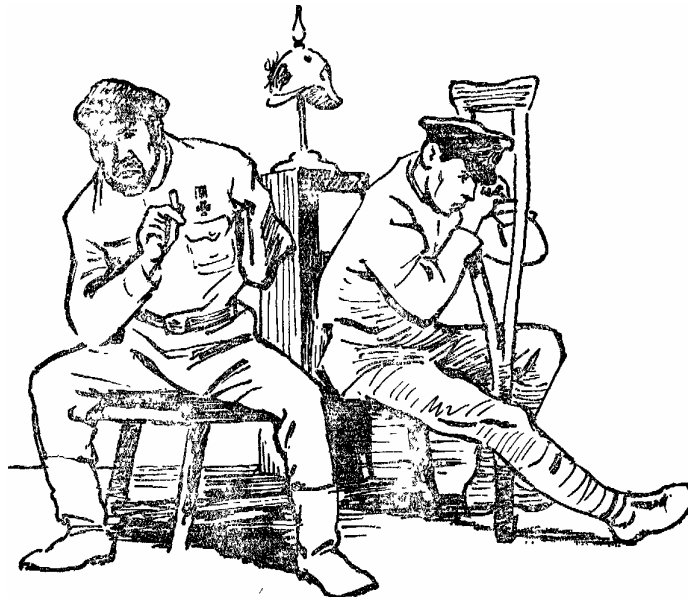
A BARGE OF CRIPPLED HEROES

The autumn of 1917 was the first autumn during which Russia was not ruled by a tsar.

This autumn was just like any other, a time of melons, shoals and second exams for the boys who had not been promoted. At this time a barge carrying bearers of the St. George Cross for Valour docked at Saratov. There was a Museum of War Trophies on the barge, and so the entire school was taken to see this floating embodiment of patriotism.

A slogan painted on the side of the barge read: "War to a Victorious End!" You could still make out the lettering underneath that had not been completely erased. It read: "For our country, our tsar...." Every single member of the crew had been awarded the St. George Cross. Nearly all were missing an arm or a leg, and some were missing both. Artificial legs and crutches creaked and tapped along the deck. However, every man had a little St. George Cross dangling on his chest.

We roamed the barge for three hours, sticking our heads into the wide barrels of the Austrian howitzers and fingering the silk of the Turkish banners that had been captured in battle. We saw a tremendous German shell called a "trunk". You could pack the death of an entire company into one of them. Finally, the amiable curator showed us the museum's main exhibit. It was a German helmet, taken off a dead officer. Its outstanding features were the hair of the killed man that was stuck to the inside of the helmet and real, dried German blood. The curator spoke of this with relish.



The curator was an officer. He stood on his own, natural legs and gesticulated with his own undamaged, well-cared for hands.

THE DEFEAT OF ST. GEORGE

Stepan did not say a word all the way back, but that very evening he came over to the scout clubroom and quarrelled with the rest of us.

"Did you notice the smell there, fellows? Just like the butcher stalls at the market. That's the smell of blood. It hits you right in the nose. But what the hell's it all about? After all, they're all human beings."

"We have to fight to a glorious, victorious end," one of the boys ventured.

"You're a damn fool! Just aping what somebody else said. What's there in it for us? To hell with you and your precious St. George. Go play soldiers, and maybe you'll get a St. George Cross, too. As for the Boy Scouts, what the hell good are you if you're all for the war? Cross me off your damn list. Understand? I've had enough of fooling around." He pulled out a pack of forbidden cigarettes and lit one up insolently.

We stood around in silence, feeling somehow embarrassed. Then Hefty grunted, slowly pulled out his own pack of cigarettes, went over to Atlantis and said, "Give me a light. The game's over. Let's go."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell was smiling down at us from the wall. There was nothing funny about it at all, but according to the scout law, a scout was always supposed to be cheerful. Sir Robert grinned, just like Monokhordov.

ATLANTIS

Once, during a geography lesson in the first grade, Stepan Gavrya, who had been left back, raised his hand from where he sat in the last row and said, "Is it true what it says in books about Atlantis? I mean, that there really is a place like that?"

"Perhaps. Why?" Kamyshev, our geography teacher, asked with a smile. "Because I'm going to find it, that's what. I'll look around in the ocean, and I know I'll find it. I'm a darn good diver, you know."

That was when Stepan got his nickname. From that day on he became known as Atlantis. Stepan, that devoted pigeon fancier and dare-devil, really did dream of finding the lost Atlantis.

Sitting in a hayloft, sneezing from the fragrant dust, he described his future to his friends. "I'll pump all the water out of there and fix all the doors in the palaces, and you've never seen the kind of life we're going to have. It'll really be a lark! There won't be any principals there, and no Latin, that's for sure."

He left stifled within the stone walls of the school. Stepan was hot-headed. His head was as hot as a watermelon in a melon patch on a blazing July day. Learning came very hard to him. He was from a very small farm outside the town, and all of the vast, endless steppe was his back yard. He was used to shouting at camels, and his foghorn voice shook the official stillness of the school every time he opened his mouth.

"Gavrya," a teacher would say, calling on him. "Yah?" Stepan would bellow in reply and then be reprimanded. He had run away to join the army, but had been returned home from the very first railroad station. Then he had run away again and had been caught again. He did not like to talk about it.

UPSIDE-DOWN

Stepan had strange, funny ideas about life. First, before really getting the hang of a thing, he would see it upside-down, as it were. They said he had even learned to read upside-down in the beginning. This is how it had all come about. Stepan's elder brother was being prepared for school by a teacher who came to the house to teach him to read. Stepan was still very small and was not supposed to participate in these lessons. The teacher would open the primer, and Stepan's brother, who sat by her side, would read aloud. Stepan would sit across the table from them, leaning over as he listened to every word. However, when he looked at the book he would see all the words upside-down, and that was how he remembered them. That was how he learned to read: from right to left and upside-down. He later had a very hard time learning to read the correct way.

Stepan suddenly became very grown-up after the boys' visit to the barge to see the wounded soldiers. He was forever going off someplace and reading books we knew nothing about. He would often drop by at my house, but would spend his time in the kitchen talking to Annushka's soldier. Another frequent visitor there was a Czech named Kardac, a prisoner-of-war who had been in the Austrian Army. The three of them would argue heatedly. After one such argument Stepan said to me in a puzzled voice "What do you know? It looks like I have everything upside-down again. Can you beat that! I was a damn fool talking about Atlantis the way I did. We can have a pretty good life here, too, you know. That's something I never thought about."

THE EVE

Hungry women standing in line for bread at the market fell upon the mayor. Dogs howled at night, and the wooden clappers sounded feebly in the awkward hands of the volunteer home guardsmen. The city council was in session every single day. A cold, damp wind was blowing from the Volga, tossing scraps of foam onto the bank. Torn shreds of proclamations: "Citizens!... The Constituent Assembly..." waltzed along the dusty streets.

Something very heavy was dropped in Saratov beyond the Volga at four o'clock in the afternoon. This was followed by a great gust of wind. The windows rattled. Boom!

And then again, twice in a row:

Boom!... Boom!

It seemed as though someone was swinging a tremendous rug beater, beating out a fantastic rug that was miles long. People would stop on the street and look up at the sky. Crows winged back and forth. Crowds of idlers dotted the rooftops, as they usually did when there was a fire someplace. Those standing on the pavement shouted:

"See anything?"

"Sure. As clear as day. That was some explosion."

"Who's shooting?"

"Who knows? Probably the Cadets!"

From the top of the school building we could see tiny white puffs of smoke rising over Saratov. They quickly expanded to become dark, ragged clouds. Half a minute later a heavy blow would come crashing down on the roof, deafening us slightly. By night time there was a red glow of fire over Saratov. Nobody turned on their lights in Pokrovsk that night. The sky was a feverish crimson.

THE HISTORY LESSON

At nine o'clock the following morning boys in long great-coats hurried across the square as always. Their pencil boxes rattled in their satchels.

A dull grey morning crept into the classrooms. The lectern creaked as the sleepy-eyed history teacher leaned on it. The monitor, crossing himself automatically, rattled off the morning prayer. Then he handed the teacher the class journal and reported on the absent pupils:

"Stepan Gavrya is absent."

The teacher had not had enough sleep. He yawned and scratched his chin. "And so the Emperor Justinian the Great and ... aag-ah-haa ... Theodora ... (he was overcome by yawning). And The-agh-aah-do-oh-ra...."

It was terribly dull to have to listen to an account of ancient, long-dead emperors at a time when real, live people were making history right there, across the Volga. There was a loud murmuring in the classroom. Finally, Aleferenko got up and said:

"Would you please explain all about what's going on in Russia right now?"

"Gentlemen!" The teacher was indignant. "In the first place, I'm not a newspaper. Secondly, you are too young to discuss politics. Now, where were we? Justi...."

"You sure are old," someone in the back row muttered.

"Old regime, that's what you are!"

"What? Get up and stand by the wall!"

"Don't listen to him, Kolya!" the boys shouted. "Who does he think he is, Justinian the Great?"

"Get out!"

But just then a deep, mighty, all-consuming sound burst in from the *sires*, carried in on the wings of the wind. It was the bone-meal factory whistle. It was immediately caught up by the piping whistle of the railroad depot. The lumber yards on the hill joined in various trebles. The flour mill whistled. The cannery buzzed like some distant bumblebee. A river boat on the Volga piped frantically, wildly.

The morning was full of their songs.

The inspector dashed into the classroom. Confusion was entangled in his beard like a fly. No one rose to greet him.

A DAY THAT WAS NOT ENTERED IN THE LEDGER

Annushka's soldier friend, Kharkusha, was making a speech on the river bank. He was standing on the pier, gesticulating with his good hand. From afar he

seemed to be conducting the orchestra of whistles. We elbowed our way through the crowd.

A boat was rapidly approaching the pier. It was the *Tamara*. Its wheels turning smartly, slapping the water, and two ridges of white foam rose on either side of the prow. A red flag looked as if it was about to fly off the mast. The boat was now close enough for us to see the men and machine-guns on its deck. The men looking weary but determined, and as set as if they had been bolted to the deck.

This was the revolution docking at Pokrovsk. The captain on the bridge was wearing a red armband. Standing next to him with a rifle slung over his shoulder and his cap tilted back was Atlantis. I recognized the man standing next to him. They were workers from the lumber yards.

"Hey! Look! It's Stepan!" my classmates yelled. "Atlantis! How'd you get there?"

Petya Yachmenny, a very proper boy, shook his head and said, "Why'd you play hookey? You'll get in trouble now."



"Oh, no, I won't!" Stepan said and laughed. He leaped over the railing and on the pier as the boat was docking. "Not on your life I won't! The Black Book's good as dead and buried now. For good!"

The tie ropes had been secured, and now the boat was hissing as it bumped against the pier. The captain was issuing commands through a megaphone. Men with red armbands were lining up on the deck.

"These're our men," Atlantis said proudly.

"They're Bolsheviks," people murmured in the crowd.

"Ready!" the captain said.

THE END OF THE BLACK BOOK

At the end of the spring term we burned the school diaries that contained our day-to-day marks. Such was the old school custom. This time, however, it seemed to have acquired a new significance, one that we were all aware of.

A huge bonfire blazed in the school yard. We pranced about it in a wild Indian dance as the flames consumed our "D's" as our reprimands disintegrated and the days we had attended school went up in smoke.

"Hooray!" we shouted, three hundred strong. "Hoor-rray! We're burning! the last! diaries! of the old regime! They'll never return! An end to all diaries! An end to no dinners! Death to the ledgers! Hooray! The last school ledgers in the world are burning! No more cramming or demerits! There go the ledgers of the old regime!"

Hefty and Stepan made their way to the deserted Teachers' Room.

The bookcase containing the Black Book was locked. The squirrel's tail was tickling dusty Venus' nose. A huge papier-mâché model of a human eye stared at the boys in amazement. Then Hefty kicked in the door panel.

The Black Book was removed from the bookcase.

"Into the fire with it!" Atlantis yelled as he appeared on the porch, carrying the thick Ledger. "We'll roast Seize'em's tattling!"

But every single boy wanted to touch the Dove Book, to read what it said about him, to discover its secrets. All the ledgers of previous years were then tossed into the flames. The last was read aloud by the bonfire, and we had a grand old time listening to its loathsome pages. We decided to preserve it for posterity, and Stepan was elected to be the Keeper of the Ledger, since at least a quarter of all the mischief reported in it concerned the boy who had once decided to set out in search of Atlantis.

The old ledgers were going up in flames. Their hard covers writhed in the fire. Then Forsunov, one of the seniors, came out on the porch. He was a member of the local Council of Deputies.

"Let's have a minute of quiet, comrades," he said. "The Council of Deputies has decided to fire all the old regime teachers. This means that Romashov, Roachius, Ukhov and Monokhordov will all go. We'll have new teachers. We'll elect our own representatives to the Teachers' Council. Everything'll be different now. This is the end of the Black Book."

Three hundred boys in grey school uniforms marched around the fire that was now dying down. They hooted and howled, and shouted gleefully as they carried the unmasked and helpless Black Book at the head of this unheard-of funeral procession.

Meanwhile, a mound of charred, brittle pages was curling up amidst the ashes.



WANDERING ISLANDS



NETTLES AND TOADSTOOLS

We spent the summer of 1918 on the Carshandar Riviera in Northern Schwambrania and in the village of Kvasnikovka, which was twelve kilometres from Pokrovsk.

We battled all through the summer, stamping out large settlements of toadstools and cutting down every nettle in sight with bloodthirsty glee. Naturally, quite a few innocent mushrooms and harmless dandelions lost their lives in the fray. It was rainy summer, and weeds and grass sprouted in great profusion. Then one day we captured the worst villain of all, Death-Cap-Poison-Emir. It was an amazing mushroom with a stem as large as a tenpin and a dark-red cap dotted with white bumps that looked like a huge chunk of sausage. There could be no doubt about it: this was the chieftain of all toadstools.

We carried Death-Cap-Emir home with great pomp, walking along in the shade of its umbrella-cap. Suddenly, two men appeared on the road. They had come from the ravine and were walking towards us.

"That's some umbrella! Whaddya know!" one of them said. He had big ears that wiggled when he spoke. The man was wearing a ragged khaki field jacket and puttees. There was a visible stubble on his chin. In fact, there was something definitely nettle-like about him that made me feel itchy when he looked at us.

"He made me all itchy inside," Oska said to me afterwards.

Just then the other man came up. His grin revealed two rows of rotten teeth. The second man was pale and puny. He had on a linen shirt with a standing collar and a large mushroom-like hat. He reminded me of a rotten toadstool.

"Won't you treat us to that dainty titbit, young men?" the toadstool-man said.

"Don't be stingy, brother," the nettle-man said. "We're damn hungry. And everything's common property now, even mushrooms, by the way. Am I right, brothers?"

"How'd you know we're brothers?" Oska asked.

"I know everything."

"Everybody's brothers now," the toadstool-man added. Then he went on in very solemn voice: "Young men, judging by the look of your swords, I can see I am you are a pair of fine, upstanding knights. Help your suffering fellow-men in time of trial, brothers, or I'll be forced by the pangs of hunger to eat this mushroom the poison-mushroom variety, and I will die at your feet in terrible convulsions

"That's for sure. We're more dead than alive anyway," the nettle-man said.

We were horror-stricken when he bit off a small piece of the death-cap began to writhe. The toadstool-man would have pulled his hair in despair had he had any, but he was bald. We stood there in stunned silence and then heard something knocking inside the dead man.

"His heart's still ticking," Oska said uncertainly.

"That's my spirit entering and leaving my body in turns, Brother," the dead said sorrowfully. "Here I am, dying of hunger, poor soul, and all because of the revolution. What did I shed my blood for? Call your dear mamma, boys. Maybe she can save this orphan. Tell her a man is dying and is willing to trade a watch or a clock for some bacon."

The nettle-man then began pulling pocket watches, locket-watches, stopwatches, alarm clocks and chronometers from his pockets. We stared spellbound in awe at this great treasure. The environs of Kvasnikovka resounded with a mighty ticking.

THE COMMISSAR CHECKED THE TIME

Half an hour later the summer people and the local village women crowded around the two men. The nettle-man was pulling wall clocks and cuckoo clocks from his bag and winding them up, while the toadstool-man, like some circus magician, was pulling a length of silk material from his stomach and growing thinner by the second. He then came up with the following from his knapsack:

two desk sets, a pair of bedroom slippers, a small fish bowl (no fish), an icon, a pair of curling irons, several gramophone records, a dog collar, a

starched dickey, an enamel bedpan and a mouse-trap. His floppy hat turned out to be a lampshade.

"Do you have a sewing machine?" one of the village woman asked.

"I did have one, but I traded it in Tambov."

As the trading was proceeding at a lively pace, the nettle-man made a speech, just as if he were at a meeting.

"Now, my dear ladies, women and everybody else, you can see what we've come to, and all on account of those Bolsheviks. And, mind, we shed our working-class blood for them, down to the very last drop, my dear ladies and women. We're both from Petrograd."

"Look! The Commissar's coming!" a boy shouted.

The nimble men quickly stuffed their wares back into their sacks.

"Let's see your papers," Commissar Chubarkov said when he had got out of the gig. "And stop agitating!"

"How can you say such a thing? You're supposed to be one of us," the nettle-man replied calmly.

"I'm not one of you, and don't you ever forget it," Chubarkov said angrily and put his hand in his pocket. "Let's see your papers, you damn profiteer!"

The toadstool-man's hands shook as he pulled out a scrap of paper. This was what was written on it: "The bearer is an assistant bookkeeper ... and research worker."

The nettle-man had no identification papers at all. He himself seemed dismayed about it.

"Pack up your junk and get going, both of you, before I pull you in. There's too many of you toadstools popping up all over!" Chubarkov said.

"You're mistaken! We're just travellers on our way. In fact, we don't even have many personal property. You can search us if you want to," the toadstool-man said.

"I've no time to waste on you. You're lucky I'm in a hurry, I'll bet it o'clock by now."

"Cu-ckoo, cu-ckoo, cu-ckoo!" went the cuckoo clock in the nettle-mans bag.

PUTTING THE LID ON BRESHKA STREET

Pokrovsk had changed during our absence. The market was gone, and some former rich men were sweeping the market square. The owner of the bone-meal factory was one of them. We crossed off the second item on our list of injustices. A speakers' platform had been erected in the place where the Earth curved, and a machine-gun now protruded from the window of the big house on

Breshka Street where an overweight fox-terrier used to bark at passers-by. A red flag hung out over the window.

We saw the nettle-man again in Pokrovsk. He was leading a gang of k mob of deserters had gathered outside a wine shop early that morning, de that they be given wine. The big plate-glass windows silently reflected the crowd. Then the nettle-man picked up a metal rod and whacked the window. The shattered glass said "zing".

An hour later Breshka Street was reeling drunk. Women carried off pails of Port wine on yokes. There were puddles of wine on the road, and wine flowed gutters. Men lay down on the ground and drank straight from them. Sc had their arms around the deserters. Oranges that had been allocate orphans' home were rolling down Breshka Street. Pigs slobbered over the oranges. A huge fat sow was splashing in a puddle of Madeira. A spotted hog was miserable on the corner, throwing up champagne.

Commissar Chubarkov came galloping up in his gig. He jumped down before it had drawn to a stop.

"In the name of revolutionary order, I have to ask you all to please..." the commissar was saying.

"Where were you before?" the schoolboys demanded.

Chubarkov coaxed them, pleaded with them, demanded and warned them.

"Everything belongs to everybody!" the drunken mob shouted, aping the nettle-man's words. "We shed our blood, down to the very last drop...."

That was when the machine-gun in the window of the big house began to chatter, sending a first round over the drunken heads. The cowardly mob vanished into thin air.

Oska and I recalled playing Schwambrania on the windowsill and making-believe we were shooting down Breshka Street, but at that time it was invincible.

Half an hour later some Red Army men dragged a drowned man from the cellar of the shop. He had probably fallen down and drowned in wine.

Chubarkov went over to the body, had a look and shook his head when he recognized it. "Cuckoo," the Commissar said.

THE CODE WORDS OF SCHWAMBRANIA

Stepan Atlantis sent me the following note while we were away in Kvasnikovka for the summer: "Be at school on the 1st. The CWS will be opened. That sure will be something! S. Gavrya."

It took me some time to figure out what "the CWS" stood for. Suddenly, it dawned on me. It meant "The Code Words of Schwambrania". Someone had discovered the secret of the seashell grotto, had let out our Black Queen and

found the note. Stepan knew all about Schwambrania now, and he was going to tell everyone else about it, too. Oska and I were stunned. Harsh reality had come crashing into our cosy little world.

However, when we returned home after the summer we saw that the seal on the gate to the grotto had not been touched. The Black Queen, the keeper of the secret, was still serving her sentence inside, deep within the cobweb gloom. But how had Stepan learned about Schwambrania? I decided to have it out with him. He was a great one for imagining and make-believe himself and had even earned his nickname because of his dream of discovering Atlantis. I decided that Schwambrania and Atlantis might become friendly nations after all.

Stepan was very happy to see me. He had grown taller over the summer and somehow seemed older.

"Still alive and kicking?" he said.

"As you see. How'd you find out about the CWS?" I asked hesitantly.

"What's so strange about that? All the fellows know about it."

"Thanks for blabbering it to everybody. I thought you were my friend. That's the most important thing in my life." I wanted to explain why this was so and told Stepan all about the volcanic land, saying I thought the Schwambranians and the people of Atlantis should be allies.

Stepan listened intently. Then he sighed and put out the sparks that had appeared in his eyes. "I don't think about Atlantis any more. I've no use for that kind of make-believe now. I've no time for it. There's the revolution. All those secrets were all right for tsarist times. But now there's too much to be done. Still, I like what you made up about Schwambrania. But the CWS has nothing to do with it. That's what we'll have instead of the Boys School now. A Common Work School."

THAT'S THAT!

A red flag waved over the school building on the 1st of August. We were all gathered in the yard outside. It was a bright, sunny day. Kamyshov, our new principal, came out on the porch to greet us.

"Hello, doves! Congratulations on your new status. You are now pupils of the Soviet Common Work School. Congratulations."

We thanked him and congratulated him, too.

"Now, since I've been appointed Commissar of Health, I want to introduce your new, temporary principal, Comrade Chubarkov. He's also the Military Commissar. I hope you'll get on."

Chubarkov was not greeted with applause. He said, "Comrades! You're all educated boys. Now you take me, for instance. I was an uneducated stevedore. You've all got book-learning, but I went to the school of hard knocks. I want to

say a few words about your new school, and what the name stands for. First of all, it's school that all children can go to. That's for sure. And why is it called a work school? Because it's for the children of all working people, and you'll learn to work well here, both mentally and physically. That's for sure. And it's a common school, because there won't be any special schools for the rich and the nobility any more. All children are equal now, and they'll all get an equal chance to study. And so's this will all be for the good of the revolution, I ask you, in the name of revolutionary order, to attend school regularly and to take care of things here, and then everything will be just dandy."

"Where were you before?" Hefty and a couple of the older boys shouted. "Down with the Commissar! We want Kamyshov!"

"In the name of revolutionary order, I'll have to ask you to accept the Council's decision. Kamyshov has just been transferred to another job. And that's that. Before, only rich people had the money to take care of their health. Now everybody's going to be healthy. It's a very important job, and all the more so since there's a lot of typhus going around now. And that's that!"

Comrade Chubarkov, Bertelyov, one of our teachers, Forsunov, a member of the City Council, Stepan Atlantis and two senior boys were appointed to the School Council. Some of the seniors hissed. Then Chubarkov said that since women were now the complete equals of men, we would have girls in our classes. And that was that!

A SENSITIVE MISSION

The Boys and Girls schools were to merge. But then the classrooms would be too small. That was why the grades were divided into "A" and "B". We set up a special committee to choose the girls we wanted to have in our class. I was the chairman and Stepan was my assistant. We spent a good half-hour grooming ourselves in front of the cloakroom mirror. Every pleat was in place. Hefty, the class strong-man, had pulled our belts as tight as possible, making our chests protrude mightily, though we were barely able to breathe as a result. However, we bore the discomfort stoically. Stepan asked someone to spit on his cowlick. There were a great many volunteers, but he only let me do it.

"Not too thick! And don't hawk."

I did my best. Stepan smoothed down the cowlick.

"You sure look like you could take anyone on!" Hefty said as he looked us over with fatherly concern. "Real chic! They'll all fall in love with you. Be sure you pick the prettiest ones."

We set off for the Girls School, escorted by an honour guard of five boys. School was in session there. The corridor was a haven of peace and quiet. Muted rivers and lakes, petals and stems, conjugations and declensions seeped

out from under the classroom doors. Old desks were piled up in a far corner next to a brand-new piano, which had probably been requisitioned from some wealthy home.

"Let's take the music back, too," Stepan said.

We had already found out that the fourth grade had been left to its own resources, since the Russian teacher was ill. In order to occupy the girls their school marm had told them to read aloud in turn. She was seated at the lectern, embroidering a handkerchief. A plump girl was declaiming:

"Who rides there, who gallops, engulfed by the gloom?"

"We do," came a voice from the corridor.

The classroom doors burst open and a weird procession rolled in, accompanied by a victorious rumbling. This was better than the wildest Schwambranian dreams.



Leading the way like tanks were two desks moving in single file. Each had a flag stuck in the inkwell hole. Stepan and I had arrived on the desks. The piano followed grandly in our wake with five boys pushing it.

The wheels screeched like stuck pigs. A list of the boys of our class was balanced on the music stand, our caps were hung on the candlesticks, and the soft pedal had on a straw slipper someone had found in the yard.

"Here we are!" Stepan said. "You're not having a lesson now anyway, are you?"

A stunned silence greeted us.

"What is this!" the school marm shrieked. The sound was so loud it made a sensitive string inside the piano vibrate for some time.

"It's a peaceful deputation," I said and then played a popular waltz as I stood at the keyboard.

The school marm stormed out of the room. The girls finally awoke from their stupor.

"Most equal girls!" I said, launching into my speech. "Most very equal girls!" I repeated and proceeded still more heatedly: "I want to tell you about what I want to tell you."

By now all the girls were smiling. This encouraged me. I went on briskly to say that now we would all be going to the same school, girls and boys together, like brothers and sisters, like bread and butter, like bacon and eggs, like Napoleon and Bonaparte, like Rimsky and Korsakov.

"How'll we sit, boys separately, or a boy and a girl at each desk?" a tall, serious-looking girl asked. "I don't want to sit next to a boy."

"The boys'll pull our braids," a fat girl said in a deep voice. "They might even try to kiss us."

Our deputation exhibited great indignation. I played "Storm on the Volga", banging away at the keys, and Stepan spat in disgust and said,

"Kiss? Ugh! I'd rather eat a toad!"

"Can we play staring games?" the smallest girls asked all together. They had huge bows on the tops of their heads.

"Hm." I pondered over this for a minute. "What do you say, Stepan?"

"I'd say they can," he replied condescendingly.

After several other equally important details had been discussed and the official, polite part was over, we began, most impolitely, to pick the girls who we wanted as classmates.

The girls, meanwhile, were busy prettying up.

The first girl whose name I put down on my list was Taya Opilova, She had a long golden braid.

"I look terrible today. I hab a code (have a cold)," she said.

As we compiled our list, we gave each girl a nickname, entering it beside her real name. Thus, we wrote "Bamboo" next to a tall girl's name, "Squirts", beside two small girls' names, and "Madame Hippo" beside a fat girl's name. There were also Sonya-Personya, Fifi, Beanpole, Lilly-Pill, Monkey-face and Grind.

The girls we hadn't picked said we were idiots.

Once outside, Stepan said, "We'll have to cut out the swearing now until they get used to it."

A few moments later we came upon a deputation from our brother "B" class. There was a heated exchange on the subject of our having got there first, after which our appearance and mood were lightly marred.

CHOPSTICKS

The pigeons were dying out in granary row. The wind rustled in the empty granaries, whispering the terrible word "ruin". "No need for a spoon in time of ruin," the janitor said sadly as he observed the way things were going in school.



And the way they were was enough to make horses shy. All day long someone or other was playing "Chopsticks" on the piano with one finger. Dum-de-dum-de.... The piano was rolled down the corridor, from one classroom to another, depending on which teacher had not come to school. The given room would then turn into a dance floor. Pupils would leave without permission. Someone sang a ditty: *"Karapet, my dear friend, why do you look so bad? I look bad, my dear friend, 'cause I always feel sad."*

As soon as the bell for classes rang, the teachers tried to coax the pupils back to their rooms.

"You used to be such a good student," Alexander Karlovich, our kind math teacher, said in despair as he caught me by the sleeve. "Come along and I'll tell you about a most interesting thing concerning the trigonometrical functions of an angle. You'll be surprised at how interesting it is. It's like reading a good book."

I was too polite to refuse. We entered the empty classroom. Someone was playing "Chopsticks" in the adjoining room. Alexander Karlovich sat down at the lectern. I took a seat in the first row. Everything was fine, if not for the fact that there were no other pupils present. I was the whole class.

"Go to the board, please," the teacher said.

As I went over to the blackboard I saw the schedule for the next day tacked upon the wall. Oho! The next day was going to be a hard one. There would be five lessons. The first was music appreciation, the second was drawing, the third was a mid-morning snack, the fourth was shop and the fifth was gym.

"Well, let us begin," the teacher said, addressing the empty classroom.

Someone was still playing "Chopsticks".

THE UNIFORMLESS JUNIORS

We had all grown and now protruded from our school great-coats like trees above a picket fence. The buttons on our chests had retreated to the very edge of the seams under pressure of our expanding masculinity. The belt in back had crept all the way up from our waist to our shoulder blades, but we staunchly continued wearing our old uniforms. There was a bluish spot that resembled a butterfly on our faded caps, left by the cockades we had removed.

One day Comrade Chubarkov brought seven new boys to my class. They were variously clad, but none was wearing a school uniform, though they all had on the same broad belts with the letters "JHS" on the buckle. They clustered behind Chubarkov's broad back.

"Quiet, everybody!" Chubarkov said. "Now, hello! Onto the next question. Since the school is now a common school, it means everybody is going to study together. I want to introduce these boys. They're from the junior high. I want you all to be friends."

"Down with the Juniors!" the boys in the back rows shouted. "We don't want them here! They don't know half of what we do!"

Chubarkov, who had reached the door, turned back. "Anybody who doesn't want to study with the rest can study at home with a tutor. And that's that!" He stalked out.

The Juniors clustered by the lectern uncertainly.

"Hello, privileged classes," said Kostya Rudenko, an olive-skinned Junior whose nickname was Beetle. We knew him from our street fights. "Hello, boys and girls," Kostya Beetle said politely.

"Wa yo fa puh?" Hefty said.

("Want your face pushed in?" some of our boys interpreted.)

"We dyo be me?" Kostya Beetle replied calmly.

("When did you ever beat me?" the Junior explained.)

Our boys were taking off their watches to make sure they would not be broken during the fight. The girls were entrusted with their safekeeping.

"You're just a bunch of uniformless Juniors," Hefty muttered as he advanced on Kostya. "Look at you, shoving your way into our high school from

your lousy junior high. You don't even have silver buttons, you don't even have school uniforms. But you're all shoving your way up, aren't you?"

"We know more than you do. What do you know about logarithms?" Kostya said.

Hefty had never heard of them. "I don't give a damn for that! I'll push your face in, and that'll teach you."

Still and all, he was put out. I could see some of my classmates leafing through their geometry books. Since I knew the answer, I raised my hand to save the honour of my class.

Stepan Atlantis slapped down my palm. "They'll manage without you," he said softly. "It serves him right. Good for Kostya. He made Hefty eat humble pie. Come on, sit down, boys. There are a lot of empty vacancies."

The Juniors began taking seats timidly amidst the chilling silence. Kostya found a seat beside the Squirts, two little girls who were inseparable.

"Don't sit next to us," they said, tossed their bows and moved away in a huff.

THE STARING GAME

Having girls in the classroom brought about many changes, the most important of which was a new staring game. The game caught on like wildfire, with everyone playing it. The players would sit opposite each other and stare into each other's eyes. If one of the players' eyes began to tear from the strain and he blinked, he would be eliminated. We had popeyed champions among the girls and the boys. We even held a staring match. Now the hours in school slipped happily away.

A contest organized to determine the champion "crazy-gazer" lasted for the whole of two lessons and part of the long recess. Liza-Scandalizer was competing against Volodya Labanda. They did not take their unseeing eyes from each other for two and a half hours. During the physics lesson that day the teacher was amazed at the unusual quiet in the classroom. Not knowing what to make of it he explained the principles of a water level to the class and then tiptoed out.

Towards the end of the long recess Volodya put his hand over his smarting eyes. He threw in the towel. Liza, however, kept on staring at him motionlessly from under her brows. The girls were jubilant. They squealed and shrieked, and carried on. We stuck our fingers in our ears.

However, Liza-Scandalizer kept on staring at the same spot. Her head was tilted strangely. The Squirts bent down to look at her and bounced away in terror. Then we all saw that Liza's eyes had rolled way up, so that only the whites were visible. She was in a dead faint.

NO TIME TO STUDY

The boys tried hard to be polite when the girls were present. The really outrageous inscriptions were scraped off the desk tops and the walls. When the boys wanted to wipe their noses with their hands they went behind the blackboard. Polite notes and messages in tiny envelopes were passed during classes. Thus:

"Good morning, Valya. May I see you to your corner on a matter of great secrecy? If you show this to Serge, I'll brain him, and it'll be piggish of you besides. Kolya. P.S. Excuse the messy writing."

Each day there was "dancing till dawn". We made sure during these evening parties that none of the boys from the "B" class danced with our girls. Anyone found guilty of this crime was dragged off to one of the dark and empty classrooms. After a brief and prejudiced questioning, the culprit was beaten. Naturally, his friends panted for revenge. Soon these daily massacres in the deserted classrooms took on such a scope that the seniors had to post armed monitors at the doors. Their rifles were a leftover from the home guards. Sometimes, the monitors would fire into the darkness, just in case. The dancing couples soon got used to the sound of shooting.

Hefty, who had taken part in the looting of the wine shop, had set up a small wine cellar in the classroom stove. Madame Hippo was never one to refuse a drink. She was a plump, overgrown young lady who intimidated both the boys and the girls. She whipped a boy who had insulted her with his own belt, right there on the lectern in front of everybody. As for me, she once knocked me down on to the tile floor so hard it took at least five minutes for me to feel I was still alive, although not quite at that.

Stepan Atlantis looked glum. Whenever he met any of the other boys' parents they would say: "Well? Are you satisfied now? Are you having the time of your life at school? It's a disgrace, that's what it is. How can you even call it a school?"

Stepan tried to call the wild farm boys to order. He was supported by the Juniors and some of his friends, but no one listened to us.

"When are we going to start studying again?" we said unhappily.

"There's no time for studying now. This isn't the old regime. We've had enough!" Hefty replied.

"You're stupid. Now at last we can really learn something," Kostya Beetle protested.

"It's fellows like you Junior Bolsheviks that need some book-learning. We old boys'll manage as it is. We know all we need to know."

That day Count Chatelains Urodenal and Jack, the Sailor's Companion also got into a learned argument. War was declared.

A SWELLHEAD

We were given lump sugar and hot tea during the long recess. We had never known such luxuries in the old school.

Now each of us received a large mug of carrot-tea and two lumps of sugar. There was no sugar in the stores in Pokrovsk at the time, so that I would have my tea in school without sugar and take the two precious lumps home. My faithful Oska would be waiting for me. He always greeted me in the same way:

"I've got news for you!" he'd say and go on to inform me of the day's events in Schwambrania.

I would give him the sugar, and we would admire the snow-white, porous cubes. We put them away in a little box that contained the sugar stores of Schwambrania. It was not to be touched. It was intended for some future gala events. On Sundays we each had a lump at the dinner given by the President of Schwambrania. Our sugar stores kept growing. We made great plans as we discussed the thickness of the future layers of sugar. The sweet geometry of those daydreams brought about a wonderful flow of saliva.

Once, however, our sugar was the cause of bloodshed.

I was chosen to be in charge of handing out the sugar in my class. This was not only a sweet job, but an honorary one. No one ever doubted my honesty.

"Huh, you're the commissar of food," the boys said. "Don't you think you're a big cheese."

Hefty, who was a brash and enterprising fellow, once suggested a tricky deal. It had to do with the left-over sugar intended for pupils who happened to be absent. Hefty suggested that I hold back the extra portions instead of returning them to the school office and then share them with him. Naturally, this tempting deal held promise of a great windfall of sugar for Schwambrania. If this had happened in our old school, I would never have hesitated and would have considered it my sacred duty to outsmart the authorities. Now, however, boys we had elected were on the Council. They trusted me. They had chosen me for the job of distributing the sugar. I couldn't betray them.

And so I refused, and my staunchness and honesty took my breath away. Hefty got even with me that very day. As I was handing out the sugar, I dropped several lumps. I bent under the desk to retrieve them. At that very moment Hefty grabbed my collar and shoved my head down. I cracked my forehead against the edge of the bench and was soon sporting a huge bump. Besides, the cut was bleeding. Two of the lumps of sugar turned pink. The girls stared at my forehead with pity and told me to put a wet compress on it, but I went on

handing out the sugar, trying not to get any blood on the other lumps. I took the two pink ones for myself. Taya Opilova gave me her handkerchief. Then, feeling bloody and exhilarated, I went down the hall to the room next to the Teachers' Room. There was a bit of red bunting tacked to the door. The room was full of smoke, noise and rifles.

"Comrades!" I said, addressing the smoke and the noise. "See? I'm bleeding because of our sugar rations, and anyway, fellows, I've long since accepted your platform. Please put me down as a sympathizer."

The noise lessened and the smoke increased. Someone said: "Your papa will put you in the corner for sympathizing, and he'll make you take castor oil to be sure you stop sympathizing. He's a doctor and he knows what to prescribe."

The smoke hid my disappointment.

Nevertheless, I showed off the bump on my forehead proudly all week long, just as if it were a decoration.

RESPIRATION—34

And the children in schools
wept for him.

"One Thousand and One
Nights"
The 35th night

That morning I left for school earlier than I usually did, for I had to stop by at the Education Department and pick up the sugar for my class. There was a large silent crowd on Breshka Street where the morning newspapers were posted on a wall outside a shop. I could not see the middle of the sheet over the heads of the others. All I could make out were the margins and the pale, greenish newsprint with the name of the newspaper: "Izvestiya".

I read the headline: "Battles Rage on All Fronts." At closer range I read part of a usual dispatch: "...Our troops are still advancing in the Urals and have taken several towns. Our forces have retreated to Yelabuga Pier on the Kama. American troops have landed in Archangelsk. The workers of Archangelsk refuse to support the rule of the Conciliators. The insurgents continue their struggle in the Ukraine."

On the bottom of the page, below someone's elbow, I made out the small type of yesterday's paper:

"The food section of the Moscow Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies brings the following to the attention of all inhabitants of Moscow. Tomorrow, August 30, no bread ration cards of the general type will be honoured. One-quarter of a pound of bread will be issued to holders of the stub

of the additional bread ration card and of children's cards for ages 2 to 12, coupon No. 13...."

The crowd was strangely silent. I could not understand what was wrong. Then the Czech, Kardac, the Austrian prisoner-of-war, and two Red Guards made their way through the crowd to the newspaper. Kardac was very pale. One of his puttees had got loose and was trailing along the ground.

"Read it out loud," he said.

Someone read the following:

August 30, 1918. 10:40 p.m.

ATTENTION, CITIZENS!

Several hours ago there was a heinous attempt to assassinate Comrade Lenin.... We call for calm and organization. All should remain at their posts. Close your ranks!

(Signed) Y. Sverdlov,
Chairman, All-Russia Central Executive Committee.

Kardac was stunned. He stared unbelievably into the mouth of the man who was reading. Then he struck his fist against his cheek and moaned.

"One bullet entering under the left shoulder blade..." the voice went on reading and stumbled.

"So," Hefty said calmly and tore off a corner of the paper to roll himself a cigarette. Kardac rushed at him, grabbed him by the shoulders and began shaking him. "I'll roll you up so tight you'll shrivel!" he shouted. The Red Guards shouldered their way over. Hefty broke free. He walked away without once looking back.

I dashed off to school.

Lenin was wounded! Lenin! The most important man. The man who had undertaken to destroy all the lists of world-wide injustice had been wounded!

The school building buzzed like a beehive.

The Juniors and some of our boys were lying on the floor in our classroom. They had borrowed an anatomical chart from the Teachers' Room and spread it out. Stabbing at it with our pencils, we tried to decide whether the wounds were dangerous or not. Kostya Beetle was sitting on his desk with his chin propped on one hand and his penknife in the other. "What if he ... dies?" Kostya said in a d voice. Then he carved the name "LENIN" on the top of his desk. Mokeich, a janitor and the keeper of all school property, came in just then. He looked Kostya severely and opened his mouth to scold him for spoiling the desk, which now belonged to the people, but then sighed, stood there silently for a while and finally left.

Heavy steps sounded on the stairs. The Seniors stopped outside the door with 1 red bunting to stack their rifles. Forsunov and Stepan Atlantis, two members oft Council, entered our classroom during the long recess. Stepan was just back from Saratov with the latest news.

"Comrade Lenin's condition..." Forsunov read the dispatch aloud, "condition ... according to the evening bulletins has improved considerably. I temperature is 37.6, pulse—88, respiration—34."

"Listen," Atlantis said to me, "we want to ask you for a favour. Your old ma a doctor. Call him up and ask him what he thinks about Comrade Lent chances."

Several minutes later I was pressing the receiver to my ear. It was still warm from someone having used the telephone before me. I was surrounded by respectful crowd.

"Is this the hospital? May I speak to the doctor, please.... Papa? This is me. The boys here and the Council asked me to ask you ... about Comrade Lenin. His respiration's thirty-four. Is that dangerous?"

Papa replied in his usual doctor's voice, "It's too early to say anything definitive yet, but it's very serious. However, there is still no reason to fear a fatal o come."

"Thank him for us," Stepan whispered.

That day we learned a new song in our singing class. It had a fine-sounding 1 difficult name: "The Internationale".

Back home Oska greeted me as always, "I've got news for you!"

"I know," I said, interrupting. "Everybody knows. Papa said he may well."

That was the first evening we did not play Schwambrania.

THE RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF A NEW BOY

I learned my ABCs
from signboards.
by snatches.
Wading through pages
of tin and iron.
Mayakovsky

Oska was enrolled in school. Oska was now a full-fledged schoolboy.

Kocherygin, a house painter and artist who was temporarily put in charge of the primary grades, wrote the following on Oska's application: "He's lacking in age, but he's accepted, on account of being bright. He can read fine print."

When Mamma came home she sounded truly surprised as she called Oska and said, "They've accepted you! What a shame that the boys don't wear uniforms any more." Mamma was very proud of him.

"Just think how much sugar we'll have now!" Oska said dreamily. "I'll be getting sugar, too."

I lectured to him in brief on "The New Boy, His Rights and Duties, or How not to Get Beaten".

Oska wore my old school cap on his first day. The cap revolved freely on his head.

"Why'd you put that on?" the temporary principal asked, peering down to get a look at him under the visor.

"That's my uniform."

"I still think you're much too little to be starting in school."

"I guess you think you're big, don't you?" Oska said, having confused the main points of my lecture as to what to say to whom.

However, he shut up just in time.

"That's no way to talk. After all, you're a doctor's son. Is that the way they bring up their children?"

"I'm sorry. I got mixed up. I wanted to say good things come in small packages."

"Can you really read small print?" Kocherygin inquired. There was undisguised respect in his voice.

"Yes. And I can read big print from across the street, and all the street signs, and I know a lot of them by heart."

"The street signs, you say?" The former sign-painter warmed to him completely.

"You really mean it? By heart? All right, tell me what's on the signs on the corner of Khorolsky and Breshka streets."

Oska was silent for a moment. Then he rattled off the following: "Ararat fruit shop fruits wines P. Batrayev stovemaker chimneys swept no loitering."

"I did the signs," the temporary principal said modestly.

"You have a very good handwriting." Oska was a very polite boy.

"What's the new sign on the Stock Exchange?"

"The 'Stock Exchange' part is crossed out and it doesn't count. It says 'Freedom House' now."

"Right. Run along, sonny. You've been enrolled."

"A new boy, a new boy!" the children chanted when Oska entered the class

"Better than an old boy!" Oska replied hurriedly, recalling my instructions.

The children were astounded.

He was spared a beating.

THE TEACHER IN A MASK

Richard Sinyagin, a wrestler known as the Steel Mask and a former stevedore was our gym teacher. At the time an International wrestling match was being held in the Saratov Circus. Richard Sinyagin went to Saratov to participate in the match. The referee, one Benedetto, presented him to the audience as "The Mystery wrestler. The Steel Mask". Soon after playbills informed the public that there would be "a decisive bout to the end, with no time limit, no break between rounds". The contestants were the Steel Mask and the Mask of Death. Naturally, all this was pure hocus-pocus. The wrestlers puffed and grunted conscientiously for the forty minutes they had previously agreed upon, after which the Steel Mask threw himself expertly to the mat. When the audience's palms had begun to stir from clapping and the noise finally died down, the referee wrung his hands gingerly and announced: "Alas! The Mask of Death has won in forty-five minutes in fair combat. Richard Sinyagin, Champion of the World and of Pokrovsk, is the Steel Mask."

In school the next day Sinyagin tried his best to convince us that he had been thrown unfairly. The boys did not hide their disapproval. Then, in order to prove his strength, Sinyagin let about eight boys climb all over him like monkeys on a tree. Then he lifted a desk, with Madame Hippo and two of her friends seated on the attached bench. He raised the desk and its inhabitants and set it on another desk. "There," he said.

At this, the lesson ended.

THE WORLD IS A CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH

We boys always respected strong men. Now we worshipped them. The staring game was completely forgotten, and wrestling became king. It squashed us in "decisive, no time limit" bouts, contorted us and threw us in standing backheels and armlocks, battering us from wall to wall in the classrooms and down the long corridors, bruising our backs on the tile floors, with Hefty Martynenko the one exception, for his back never touched the floor. Hefty was the champion of champions, the unchallenged champion of the school and the vicinity.

Naturally, all this had a definite influence on the affairs of state in Schwambrania. We had always imagined the world to be divided in two. At first, there were "desirable and undesirable acquaintances". Then there were seafarers and landlubbers, the good and the bad. After my fateful conversation with Stepan Atlantis, I came to realize that "good" and "bad" were no longer sufficient for judging things. We now discovered a new division among people, and this was to be yet another of our errors. The world and the Schwambranians were now divided into strong men and weaklings. From that day on the lives of the Schwambranians were spent in endless championship matches and contests.

One Pafnuti Synecdoche became Champion of Schwambrania, his might eclipsing even that of Jack, the Sailor's Companion, the man who threw Chatelains Urodenal.

Oska became obsessed with wrestling. He was the smallest child in his class. Any boy could throw him, even with one arm tied behind his back, as the saying goes. However, once he got home he made up for his wounded pride by wrestling the chairs and pillows. He had table-tournaments between his two hands, with each one squeezing and wringing the other until the right hand finally threw the left, knocking it silly. Oska's most constant and serious opponent was the sofa bolster. Quite often Oska would be found on the floor of the nursery with his arms flung out and the bolster on top of him, supposedly having thrown him.

"That's against the rules!" Oska would shout. "He tripped me and then got me in a nelson!"

The bolster won the return match as well, but was punished by being taken out in the yard and beaten with a rug beater.

Then Oska arranged a bout between Kolya Anfisov of the primary school and Grisha Fyodorov, the second strongest boy in my class. The bout was held in our yard on a Sunday, with all the preparations having been made the previous day. The mat was drawn on the ground with a piece of chalk, and the inside of the circle was swept and sprinkled with sand. When the fans crowded round the next day, Oska took out a toy whistle and I said:

"We will now see, I mean witness, a wrestling match between two strong men.

Presenting Anfisov (Primary School) and Fyodorov (Secondary School). This is going to be a bout without breaks, an honest fight, with no time limit or monkey-business, to the bitter end. Let's have a fanfare. Maestro! Whistle again, Oska! We all know a foul when we see one. Jury, I mean judges, take your seats by the barrel."

Oska, Hefty and Filipich, the janitor, went over to the bench by the barrel. I called the first round.

The champions shook hands and danced away from each other. Anfisov was tall and bony. Fyodorov was small and stocky, and resembled a Shetland pony. They stalked each other for several seconds, then suddenly Anfisov grabbed Fyodorov, pinning his arms to his body.

The audience froze. Even the wind in the yard died down.

"Leggo o'his arms!" Filipich yelled.

"Let go!" the older boys shouted.

"That's fair!" the younger boys cried.

I whistled. Oska tooted. The jury squabbled, and during all this commotion Anfisov threw Fyodorov.

"Hooray! It's all fair and square!" the younger boys shouted.

"You can get a hand through! It doesn't count!" the big boys yelled, but no matter how I tried, I couldn't squeeze my hand under Fyodorov's shoulder-blades, for they were pressed hard to the ground. Shame burned us as a brand. Fyodorov rose sheepishly and shook the dust off his clothes.

"Why don't you lie down again? Take a rest," Hefty jeered.

The future stretched ahead like a graveyard.

The runts were jubilant. Hefty finally lunged at them, slamming their champion down first. He then proceeded to slaughter the innocents, driving the small boys into a far corner of the yard and then stacking them like firewood.

A DECISIVE BATTLE

That was when Stepan Atlantis entered the yard. "Pardon me as a matter of procedure, but what's the fight on the agenda today?"

I told him what had happened. Hefty shifted the pile of small boys into a floundering pyramid and came over to us.

"A bunch of big louts like you playing at wrestling. Fooling around in decisive times like these!"

"You're all wrong, Stepan. This does wonders for you. Here, feel my muscle. See what I mean? If a fellow's strong, he don't give a damn for anyone. You know why you and Lelya stick to the Juniors? Because you're both yellow. You think if you can't fend for yourselves, your gang'll come running. Ha! Well, I can do without your gang. I can stick up for myself. See my fist?"

"All brawn and no brain," Stepan said. "What do you think you can do all by yourself? Where'll it get you? If our gang, as you say, or, actually, society goes after you, you'll never know what hit you. That's how strong we are!"

"Sure, if it's everybody against one. But that's not fair."

"Was it fair when everybody had to work for one boss? How many hired hands did your fat old man drive like slaves?"

"What's the matter? Did you forget your family has a farm, too?"

"Don't you compare us. Our plot was the size of a hankie. You had an orchard and a garden, and land stretching off in all directions."

"But those damn comrades of yours set up a commune there and chased us out."

"I know all about it. You tried to bury your grain in the cellar when people were starving, but I made my old man give up whatever we could spare. And don't think my mother wasn't after me! I had to stay over at Kostya Beetle's place. And then he had to hide out at my place. We're all for one and one for all. And we're against people like you."

"You mean you'd go against your own friends?" Hefty said very softly.

"Former friends." Stepan's voice was barely audible.

Silence slipped across the yard like a shadow. Then Hefty sighed loudly and headed towards the gate. He was slumped over. His shoulder blades, which had never known defeat, looked as if they had at last touched the mat.

E-MUET AND THE TROGLODYTES

The next day my class decided to spend the algebra lesson analysing the scrap between Hefty and Atlantis. Hefty sullenly refused to participate. We were expecting Alexander Karlovich, our math teacher, but instead a strange little old man in a clean and well-pressed tunic entered the classroom. He was puny, nearsighted and bald, with a brush of mousy hair growing up around his bald pate, so that it resembled a lagoon in an atoll.

"Who's the bald dome?" Hefty inquired.

The class roared.



"Eh-mew-eh.... This?" the old man said, poking a finger at his lowered pate "Why?"

"Un ... nothing special," Hefty replied. He had not expected such a reply.

"Perhaps baldness has now been ... eh-mew-eh ... outlawed?" the old man persisted.

Everyone gazed at him respectfully.

"Not at all. Any way you like." Hefty did not know how to get out of the mess.

"That's very kind of you. Let's get acquainted.... Eh-mew-eh.... I'm your new history teacher. My name is Semyon Ignatyevich Kirikov. Eh ... mew-eh.... Good morning, troglodytes!"

This was a word we had never heard before and so we were at a loss, not knowing whether he had meant it as praise or whether it was an insult. Stepan Atlantis rose.

"I've a question to ask. What rock did you crawl out from under? That's in the first place. And what did you call us? That's in the second."

The troglodytes stamped their feet and rattled their desk tops.

"Sit down, you creature. Troglodytes were ... eh ... mew-eh ... were cavemen, cave dwellers, primitive people. Our ... eh-mew-eh ... great-great-great-progenitors, our forefathers, while you ... eh-mew-eh ... you are young troglodytes."

"Does that mean I'm a troglodytess?" Madame Hippo demanded.

"Not at all! You are positively a mammoths or a brontosauruses."

"He's all right!" we whispered excitedly.

The old man turned out to be a cunning conqueror. By the time the first lesson was over he had captivated us completely. Stepan, who was never lavish with praise, conceded that "the old man's all right". We had no trouble giving our new teacher a nickname. We named him E-muet, the French mute "e", and pronounced it in French, eh-mew-eh. Kirikov did not enunciate his words. He seemed to chew on them, mumbling in between and peppering each phrase with his constant eh-mew-ehs. E-muet did not take offence. He was cheerful and kindly. The girls wrote notes to him.

E-muet called each of us a creature.

"Creature Aleferenko! Rise!"

And Aleferenko would rise.

"Now then, creature. Let's go back ... eh-mew-eh ... you cave dweller, to what we spoke of at our last lesson."

"We spoke of hand picks and the Stone Age. It was all awfully boring and prehistoric. No wars. No nothing."

"Be seated, creature. Today's lesson will be duller still."

And he would drone on dishing out the next portion of prehistoric information. Having rattled it off, he would immediately cheer up, post a sentry at the door and spend the other half of the lesson reading aloud to us from a 1912 copy of *Satirikon*, a humorous magazine, or else he would tell us hunting yarns. An attentive silence was one of the honours bestown upon Kirikov. His triumphant bald pate gradually acquired an aura of glory. He became a living legend. Despite his near-sightedness, E-muet had discovered that the class was divided into various parties, and so he, too, divided us into troglodytes (the old school boys) and anthropoids (the Juniors). This completely won over the old school boys.

However, it somehow seemed to me that every now and then something so vague you couldn't put your finger on it, but something evil and familiar poked its ugly head out of this kindly old man. It would rise up at the end of some of his jokes, apparent but as unpronounceable as e-muet, the mute "e" in French.

MAMMOTHS IN SCHWAMBRANIA

At his fourth lesson E-muet addressed a long speech to us. He even mumbled and hemmed and hawed less than usual that day. However, there was a strong smell of liquor on his breath.

"Troglodytes and anthropoids! I want to light the sacred fire of truth in your caves. I will tell you why they make me tell you about troglodytes, but forbid me to tell you about emperors. Listen, my primitive brothers, mammoths and brontosauruses ... eh-mew-eh.... History has ended...."

"No, it hasn't! The bell for recess didn't ring yet!" someone shouted.

"Which protozoan amoeba said that? I'm not speaking of our history lesson. I'm speaking ... eh-mew-eh ... of the history of mankind ... of its magnificent, martial history, so full of pomp and circumstance. History has come full circle. The Bolsheviks have turned Russia back ... eh-mew-eh ... to the primitive state, to the primordial darkness. There is chaos everywhere, and ruin.... There is no kerosene.... We shall lose our fire.... We shall be naked ... for there is no cloth.... A return to bestial primitiveness awaits us, my dear troglodytes.... The iron tracks for our trains will become evergrown! Eh-mew-eh ... the last match will go out, and the primordial night will be upon us."

"How can it, when there'll be electricity everywhere?" Stepan cried.

"Shut up! He's right!" Hefty said. "The commune wrecked everything on our farm."

"Who cares about primitive times? Tell us about when there were knights!" someone shouted.

Everyone began stamping. The troglodytes jumped over their desks.

"So let's get down on all fours, my dear troglodytes," E-muet said cheerfully, "and let's raise a hoary cry in praise of the eternal night into which we shall descend. Raghhhh! Ow-ww!"

"Ow-ww!" everyone hawled gleefully.

Some, throwing themselves into the act, scrambled down the aisles on all fours, making the rest of the class double over. Then someone began to sing:

*Ah, when the night's dark,
Oh, I'm so scared then,
Troglodytess,
My own Marusya!
Oh, Marusya,
Troglodytess!
Stop your chatter,
See me home first.*

At the lectern Kirikov was chanting like a witch doctor. Once again something very familiar flitted across his contorted face, but I couldn't seem to grasp that elusive "something". I, too, was caught up in macabre merriment of

my classmates. I felt that I, too, wanted to crawl and howl a bit. The lack of a tail was disappointing, but did not really spoil the general impression. I could practically feel the soil of Schwambrania shuddering under the heavy tread of the advancing mammoths.

"Hey, fellows, stop it!" Kostya Beetle shouted, coming to his senses. "Tell them he's pulling the wool over their eyes, Stepan. Hey, Stepan!"

But Stepan had disappeared. I hated to think that he had run off. The mammoths raised their trunks like question marks and stopped at the Schwambranian border, not knowing what to do.

Forsunov, President of the Student Council, and then Stepan came running in. The troglodytes were instantly swept forward into the 20th century. The mammoths galloped off the Big Tooth Continent. Kirikov's bald pate lost its shine.

"You can get into a lot of trouble for filling their heads with such nonsense," Forsunov said softly.

"You lousy bourgeois. You saboteur!" Stepan added, sticking his head over Forsunov's shoulder.

"Eh-mew-eh, I was simply presenting the basic ideas of, eh-mew-eh, anarchism Naked man on the naked earth, and no personal property."

"Toadstool!" I shouted joyously, taking myself by surprise. "Toadstool," I repeated with conviction, for I had recreated the nettle-man in my mind's eye, our summer of Kvasnikovka, the many clocks and watches, Death-Cap-Poison-Emi and the personal property of the bald man with the sack. And now E-muet, a mut and silent "e", had become an open "e".

Kirikov was exposed and relieved of his teaching post. The anthropoids welcomed his removal, but the troglodytes, led by Hefty, resented it. They began plotting their revenge, choosing the following day as the date for the massacre of the Juniors and calling it a "universal ruckus".

"We're going to have a St. Bartholomew's Night tomorrow morning," I whispered to Oska that night.

Oska, who was always one to confuse -words when he was wide awake, now mumbled sleepily, "Are they going to kill the Hottentots?"

"The Huguenots, not the Hottentots, and, anyway, not the Huguenots at all, but the Juniors, and they're not going to kill them dead, they'll just beat them up."

"Did tryglodytors fight in the arena in Ancient Rome, too?" he suddenly asked.

"No, gladiators. Troglodytes are...."

There were still a few lost mammoths roaming about in Schwambrania. I told Oska they were hiding out among the huge prehistoric ferns.

"Fammoths graze in the merns," he mumbled sleepily.

A GREAT, UNIVERSAL RUCKUS

The universal ruckus was invented ages ago. It was the greatest and most terrible kind of schoolboy revolt. A universal ruckus was only resorted to in extreme cases, when all other means of resisting the authorities failed. I had never yet witnessed such an event, though school legends still recalled the last one. It had taken place in 1912, after the three ringleaders of an attack on the principal's doorman had been expelled. The doorman had informed on the boys and had been pelted with rotten eggs.

And so, the troglodytes decided to declare a Great General Universal Ruckus, with Hefty in command. He looked somewhat preoccupied when he came to school the next morning, but he was calm. There was an ugly semblance of calm in the air. No one played "Chopsticks". No one wrestled. No one played the staring game. The corridor, always a churning stream, emptied the moment the bell rang. The stunned teachers walked along this strangely deserted river bed. They were greeted by a dead silence when they entered their respective classrooms.

Our first lesson was Russian grammar. The teacher, a curly-haired, blond-bearded man named Melkovsky, peeped in the door cautiously. The moment he appeared the troglodytes, displaying their former training, jumped to their feet like so many jack-in-the-boxes and stood at attention by their desks. The anthropoids and Stepan were a few moments behind the others. The general upward sweep lifted me, too. We stood there respectfully at attention.

"Now, now! Be seated everyone," Melkovsky said and waved his hand, for he had become unaccustomed to such reverence.

The pupils were settling back slowly. Melkovsky tested the lectern with the tip of his shoe. It did not explode. Then he mounted it cautiously.

"The morning prayer, Monitor!" Hefty snapped.

"Are you crazy?" Stepan said.

An oppressive silence descended upon us.

"O, Gracious Saviour, bless us this day and..." Volodya Labanda, the monitor that day, intoned.

Some of the boys were crossing themselves from force of habit. "Perhaps I'd better leave," Melkovsky mumbled. He was thoroughly confused.

Just then the monitor popped up beside him, carrying the class journal, and the puzzled teacher heard the monitor's patter, as in the "good old" Boys School days:

"Absent today are Stepan Gavrya, Konstantin Rudenko, Nikolai Makukhin..." and he went on to read the list of all the Juniors.

"Wait! Stop!" supposedly absent boys shouted and jumped to their feet. "You're lying! We're here!"

"You'll soon be absent," Hefty said. There was a smirk on his face. "The Ruckus is on, troglodytes!" He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled so shrilly it hurt our ears.

The "B" class in the adjoining room whistled back. Then eight other whistles were carried down the corridor, and a rumble echoed through the school. Classes were disrupted. The Juniors were dragged out by the feet, thrown out the doors and windows. Textbooks fluttered down, flapping their pages like huge butterflies. The girls took care of the shrieking and screaming part of it. Ink was shed in our classroom. A blackboard was being carried down the hall like an icon. "Attention, everybody! Down with the anthropoid Juniors! Long live S. I. Kirikov! Demand his reinstatement," the message on the blackboard read.

Five minutes later there was not a single anthropoid left in the building. Troglodyte patrols were guarding the exits. The desks had all been turned over.

The Great Universal Ruckus had begun.

"FIGHTING CONTINUES ON ALL FRONTS"

The Commissar tethered his horse to the door. Then he pulled up his boots and stalked down the corridor. It was deserted. Everyone was at an emergency meeting in a large classroom turned into an auditorium. Hefty sat at a table on the rostrum, looking well in the role of chairman and victor. He was flanked by Forsunov and a senior named Rothmeller, the son of a wealthy sausage merchant. Rothmeller had just finished speaking. Forsunov was gazing at the table.

A troglodyte patrol was guarding the entrance. The Juniors, rather the worse for wear and hardly anthropoids any longer, were laying siege to the door. The troglodytes moved aside to let the commissar through. Stepan Atlantis slipped in under cover of his broad back, but the troglodytes dragged him back into the corridor.

"The next speaker is Commissar Chubarkov," Hefty said.

"And that's that!" the boys shouted in unison.

"What's the ruckus?"

"It's universal!" came a chorus.

"Wait a minute, boys!"

"We're not minute-boys!"

"Comrades!" the Commissar said.

"We're no comrades of yours!"

"Then who are you?" Chubarkov was getting really angry.

"Tro-glo-dytes!" they chanted.

"What? Trouble-tykes? All right. That's enough! I say it's time to stop the nonsense. And that's that."

"Where were you before?" they jeered.



"Meaning what?" Chubarkov thundered. "It's a stupid question. You didn't dare open your mouths when Stomolitsky was the principal. And that's for sure! I can just see him getting into a debate with you! He'd put your names down in the Black Book in no time, or have you expelled."

"And that's that!" someone yelled from the back rows where the worst of the die-hard troglodytes clustered. "And that's all there is to it! We want Kirikov!"

The troglodytes were out of control. However, it was no easy job to shout out the booming voice of the former Volga stevedore accustomed to speaking at mass meetings.

"I really am surprised," he was saying slowly and forcefully, and the noise began to die down. "Can't you understand what's happening? You're getting a modern education. What's so fascinating about all those tsars? Here in the Common Work School you'll get to know about your people, about where they came from, how they got to be what they are, and about their development. As for Kirikov, who turned out to be a black-marketeer on the side, all he did was stuff your heads full of nonsense. What sort of darkness was he talking about when education brings light? Enlightenment. And don't you forget that under the old regime they kept this light from the workers and the peasants. They wanted to keep them ignorant and backward. Can you imagine all the people that are going to get an education now? Take me, for instance." He suddenly

became shy. "As soon as things quiet down, I'll be going off to Petrograd to study, too. Now why, comrades, do you and those uh, trouble-tykes, let every no-good, low-down snake-in-the-grass turn your young eyes away from the truth and keep the other fellows from getting out of that old primitive darkness and into the light? Why do you think they're worse than you? You think their daddies aren't as rich as yours?"

CALIGULA'S HORSE

What followed was to become legend. A deafening clatter was heard in the corridor, followed by Mokeich shouting: "Stop! Where d'you think you're going?"

The troglodyte guard at the door suddenly parted, and Stepan Atlantis galloped into the auditorium astride the Commissar's horse. The Juniors burst in after him, sweeping away whatever remained of the guards.

"Whoa! He got loose! I barely managed to catch him, Comrade Commissar." Indeed, Stepan was a wily fellow.

The horse whinnied softly.

"Excuse me," the Commissar said. He was apparently addressing his horse. "I'll be through here in a minute, that's for sure. This is what I think, boys. You've had your row, and now it's time to settle down. We'll put it to a vote to make it legal, and that's that!"

Hefty and Rothmeller were whispering uneasily. Stepan, still astride the Commissar's horse, looked the troglodytes over. The horse shifted its weight delicately, as if fearful of stepping on someone's toes. Hefty rose. His former swagger was gone. Once again Stepan had won the day.

"They've ridden roughshod over you," Hefty said.

No one replied. Our math teacher, Alexander Karlovich Bertelyov, went over to the table on the rostrum. He was serious, as always.

"My friends!" he said and dropped his pince-nez nervously. Then, for the next few minutes, he slapped his hand around on the table nearsightedly, as if he were trying to catch a grasshopper. He finally located his pince-nez and brought the world back into focus again. He continued: "My friends, I am not interested in politics and am not used to your mass meetings. I have only asked for the floor from a purely scientific point of view. It so happened that, due to an oversight on our part, Kirikov, and no offence meant, tried to teach you something that was pure, unadulterated hogwash. A lot of obscurantist nonsense that could never stand up to criticism, and certainly not from a purely scientific point of view. In the end, the revolution leads to progress. It brings great new layers of the population into contact with education. And you, my friends, want to stand in their way. But you have no right to! How could you? Why, it's a

crime from a scientific point of view! Many comrades ... Juniors, as you call them ... are very gifted in mathematics. Take Rudenko, for instance. He's a very fast learner. But you, my friends, have been poisoned by the die-hard spirit of the old school and are used to thinking that attending classes is a shameful way of spending your time. For shame! In conclusion, I would like to tell you a historical anecdote. The Roman emperor Caligula once brought his horse into the senate and ordered the senators to bow to it. I would never have bowed to that arrogant creature, my friends. However, if today the presence of Comrade Chubarkov's horse at this meeting will further the establishment of friendly relations and order in the school, then today, on behalf of science, I bow my head to our four-legged guest."

At this Alexander Karlovich bowed to the horse.

The horse backed away nervously at the sound of the deafening applause that followed. The matter was then taken to a vote, which brought defeat to Hefty and his troglodytes. Everyone pledged to start studying in earnest, beginning the very next day. Then Stepan made a short speech from the saddle.

"E-muet in French is a letter you write but don't ever pronounce. So I have a suggestion. It'll make things easier for us and do them a good turn while they're at it. Let's write a letter to the French workers, or to their children, and tell them to do away with that e-muet."

The proposal to write such a letter to the children of France was unanimously adopted. As we were about to disperse, a group of Red Army men suddenly entered the auditorium.

"There! See? He wanted to shut us up by force!" Hefty shouted.

Everyone was startled.

"Quiet, everybody!" one of the men said. "Let's be a little more disciplined here. Comrades! The close proximity of the front lines has put the town under martial law. The 4th Army will need this building for its headquarters. Please see that the building is cleared tomorrow, Comrade Chubarkov."

No one spoke. Then, in the stillness, the commissar's horse breathed in loudly and whinnied.

The horses of the 4th Army that were tethered outside whinnied in reply.

OUR WANDERING SCHOOL

The town became a large army camp. Countless wagon trains lumbered up and down the streets, tying themselves into knots at the intersections. Unshaven men in greatcoats untangled the knots. They were in charge of the town. Orderlies rode their horses up onto the pavements, handing in and accepting envelopes at the windows of the various offices. The camels in the wagon trains threw their heads back and bellowed loudly. Their sticky saliva fell upon

Breshka Street. The camel drivers shouted hoarsely: "Tratr! Tratr! Chok! Chok!" Fountains of spray rose on the river where shells hit the water and then fell helplessly back again seconds later. Finally, a slow-motion boom would come crashing down upon the town. Soldiers practised throwing hand grenades on the river bank.

An elephantine-like armoured car raised its cannon-trunk on the square. The live camels were followed by hopping iron ostriches, those dock-tailed gigs with tall stacks, the army field kitchens. It seemed then to Oska and me that the vehicles on the square were playing our favourite game of animal lotto called "The Cameroons Races", where each card had a picture of a running elephant, camel or ostrich. Near the storehouses some men were moving a pile of barrels with black numbers painted on the bottoms. A fat man would call out a number, another man would consult some papers and then stamp them, as if the rubber stamp were a large lotto disc. Every now and then a rider on a lathered horse would appear.

"What about accommodations?" they'd be asked.

"Everything's full up!"

And the players had to crawl under the trucks to sleep.

A strange sign had been put up on the school building. It read: "Travtochok". Translated into everyday language, it was supposed to stand for something like:

"Vehicles of the special column's automotive unit". Actually, though, no one knew exactly what the mysterious "Travtochok" stood for.

Not more than two or three automobiles were usually parked outside of "Travtochok", but the former school yard was always jam-packed with camels. The people of Pokrovsk lost no time in renaming the unpronounceable "Travtochok" into Tratrchok, which, when translated from camel-language, meant "whoa" and "giddiyap".

Our school began moving from one place to another. In the beginning, we were transferred to the former seminary building. A day later we were moved to a small house with a fire-tower. Naturally, the tower drew us like a magnet. It seemed to beg us to use it for some prank, if only to spit on the heads of passers-by or shout "Fire!". However, we did not feel up to pranks. There was a restlessness in the crowded classrooms, and boys talked in whispers in the back rows. The day after the general ruckus Volodya Labanda stopped Alexander Karlovich in the street.

Volodya stared at the ground and scuffed the dirt with the tip of his shoe like a horse as he said: "You talked about Kostya Rudenko being so gifted. I used to do math problems pretty good, too, didn't I? You said I was good in math, too."

"Of course I remember. You definitely have a good head for mathematics, but you're lazy."

"No, I'm not. We just felt like horsing around since freedom was declared. I don't think it was fair of you to talk about the Juniors like that and not say anything good about anybody else. They'll think they're better than everybody now."

"Aha! So my arrow struck home!" Alexander Karlovich exclaimed. He sounded quite pleased. "Well, why don't you try to catch up with them? I must warn you, though, that it won't be easy. They're doing quadratic equations now."

"We'll manage. You'll see!"

ALGEBRA ON THE FIRE-TOWER

That very same day we agreed that the Juniors had become stuck-up and that we could not tolerate such a state of affairs any longer. Which meant we would have to catch up with them. The girls promised to keep up with us. We retrieved our dusty schoolbooks and amazed our parents by poring over them. We discovered that we had dropped very far behind and had to stay after school and study till late at night at home in order to catch up. Alexander Karlovich, who had lost weight on a teacher's skimpy food rations, would selflessly stay on after classes. We stole bread for him from the storeroom and placed it on the lectern. He would proudly refuse it, but then, being carried away by a problem, would begin pinching off pieces unthinkingly, until he had accidentally eaten it all.

"That's some freedom you've got! You used to be swell fellows, but now you're all bookworms. Why don't you go ahead and ask them to give you marks? Ah!" Hefty would say and spit in disgust.

He was especially hard on Stepan, who said he couldn't care less and went on studying furiously, for he told us that revolutionaries had to climb right onto the barricades of learning, too.

We felt we had covered so much ground in algebra in two and a half weeks that we asked Alexander Karlovich to test one of us. He called on Labanda. The Juniors were amazed. Never before had the pupils been so intent. The only sound in the classroom was that of the chalk hitting against the blackboard as it produced heavy white figures. Labanda was doing a problem that involved a reservoir and two pipes. Everything was proceeding nicely. Water kept pouring in through one pipe and out through the other. It soon became clear that if both pipes were open the reservoir would fill in six hours. But then suddenly something happened and it began draining as we watched. Labanda had hit a shoal. He chewed on his nail.

"Think," Alexander Karlovich said.

"I'm thinking," Labanda said unhappily. "If we subtract two pipes from four pails...."

Go back to the beginning and do all your figuring out loud."

We had spotted the mistake. Labanda had written a minus sign instead of a plus sign at the very start. Now the minus had surfaced and stoppered up one of the pipes. We were dying to prompt him. However, we did not want to expose his lack of knowledge, not with the Juniors looking on. Just then we heard someone whispering. Someone was prompting. It was Kostya Rudenko-Beetle. And then the rest of the class, which had once been known for its imaginative prompting and shameless cribbing, the class that had always considered it a terrible crime to refuse to offer illegal help, this very same class now began stamping loudly to drown out the whispering voice. The boys shouted:

"Quit it, Rudenko! Let him do it himself!"

This bucked Labanda up. He concentrated, found the error and solved the problem. Then, in order to inform Pokrovsk of this, we raised a flag on the fire-tower. We had painted the following message on it: " $X = 18$ pails".

THE "B" GRADE'S PROGRESS

Our joy did not last long.

Two days later Labanda rushed into the room and said that the parallel "B" grade, which we had more or less forgotten about, since it was now located in another building, was up to equations of the highest order with several unknown quantities. It didn't seem possible.

"You're lying!" someone shouted.

"Tell us another!" Stepan said.

"I'll drop dead if I am!" Labanda even crossed himself.

We were crushed.

At this point Kostya Beetle said he knew how to solve them and would show the "B's" how to do it. Stepan was dead set against it. He said it didn't count if only one person could do them, it would just be singling out the best pupil, like before, but that what counted was if everybody could do them. Once again we all rushed to our textbooks. We would come back to school in the evenings and Kostya would help us. Hefty never came to these after-school sessions. He would say that a hungry stomach was not fit for learning, that this was no time for studying and that, anyway, he could solve any problem we could and better. When all the unknown quantities were brought out into the open, we challenged the "B's" to an algebra match. They accepted the challenge. We decided it would be a joint written test in algebra, with teams made up of the best mathematicians in each grade. Stepan Gavrya, Volodya Labanda, Kostya Beetle, Zoya 'Beanpole, and I were on the "A" team. Hefty joined us the day before the test. We were very reluctant about having him on the team, but he swore he wouldn't let us down.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE TEST

The evening before the test our team met at school for a last practice session. Alexander Karlovich, looking very weary, made us review the whole book. Then he gave us several tricky problems which we finally solved. He was very pleased from a "purely scientific point of view", but he gasped when he looked at the clock, for it was midnight, and since we were under martial law, there was an eleven o'clock curfew.

"Well, comrades, that means we spend the night in the kennel. That's for sure!"

"Come on. If they stop us we'll say we're going to the drugstore for medicine," Labanda said.

Stepan and I walked along together. A searchlight swept the low, heavy sky. Someone was singing: "Ah, when the night's dark". A military patrol stopped us at the corner.

"We're going to the drugstore. He's the doctor's son. We've got to get there," Stepan said.

"You don't say? And what are you going for? Castor oil?" the Red Army man inquired.

"How'd you guess? That's just what we need. You see...."

"Wait a bit and you'll get a big dose of it. Lapanin!" the soldier called. "Take these two fellows in."

We were escorted to headquarters, where we met some other midnight seekers of castor oil. A short while later Alexander Karlovich was brought in. He was indignant from every possible point of view.

"Good evening, Alexander Karlovich!" Stepan said cheerfully.

"I'd say it was good night," the teacher muttered. "Nice to see you all here."

Next the soldiers brought in a glum-looking black-marketeer. He was carrying a big sack. "Who came in last?" he said matter-of-factly.

"I did. Why?" Alexander Karlovich replied.

"I'll be next after you tomorrow morning and don't forget!" The man then stretched out on the floor. He was snoring a moment later.

Heavy clouds of cheap tobacco smoke curled up under the electric bulb. Our guard was examining one of his boots intently, tapping the welt with his rifle butt. This night before the test was passing sleeplessly, stupidly.

Two hours later Chubarkov phoned. We were finally released. Alexander Karlovich stopped at the threshold, having recalled something, and turned back. He had a hard time waking the man on the floor. "Pardon me. I'm leaving now. So you'll have to be next after someone else."

We bumped into another military patrol on Breshka Street. They were taking the "B" team to headquarters. They, too, had been brushing up before the test.

"I'll bet you were going for castor oil," Stepan said.

"No. For iodine."

THIS IS NOT THE OLD REGIME

"All contestants will now take their seats," Forsunov, the chief referee, said solemnly.

The sleepy-eyed mathematicians sat down. To make sure there would be no cribbing each contestant shared a desk with a member of the opposite team.

Alexander Karlovich and the "B's" math teacher were both nervous. They resembled managers whose boxers were in the ring for their first bout. Alexander Karlovich went over to each of our boys and whispered: "Think first. And don't rush. Be sure you don't mix up your signs. If there are any problems on proportions they'll be stuck because that's their weak point. I know it for a fact. But the main thing is to think."

Forsunov asked the teachers to take their places. Alexander Karlovich and his colleague sat at the large table. Mokeich was already seated there beside an empty chair left for the commissar.

Beanpole Zoya, our class champion, looked more stern than usual. The girls who were not taking part in the match kept glancing at us anxiously. They filled the inkwells to the top, tried out the pens, sharpened the pencils and wished everyone good luck. Then they went out into the corridor where the audience crowded in a doorway, promising to be very quiet.

Mokeich took out his large conductor's pocket watch. Forsunov placed the watch on the table to mark the time each contestant spent on the problem. If both teams solved it, the one whose separate members solved it sooner would be the winner and get the prize, which was a double portion of sugar. Besides, the pupil who solved it first would become the school's best mathematician.

"I'm counting on everybody's honesty," Forsunov said. "I was the best cribber under the old principal, and that's why I'm warning you: as long as I'm here and watching, nobody'll ever crib anything and get away with it. Understand?"

"Huh! What d'you think we're going to do? Cheat on our own side?"

We were cut to the quick. Indeed! This wasn't tsarist times.

"On your mark! Get ready!" Forsunov said.

A PROBLEM CONCERNING TRAVELLERS

"Two travellers going in the same direction set out from two different cities, with one traveller following the other. After some days, the number of which equals the sum of miles covered in a day, the second traveller caught up with the first one. The second traveller had by then covered 525 miles. The distance between the two cities was 175 miles. How many miles a day did each one cover?"

The starting time had been marked. The travellers were on the road, and everyone was engrossed in the problem. A stillness settled on the backs of our heads, pressing them closer to the desks. The test was under way.

However, we did not experience the familiar sense of fear and uncertainty which had confused both thoughts and numbers during the old school exams, when one's only desire was to grasp at the minutes that were slipping away so feverishly, so hopelessly, and hold them back at all costs. Ahead of us then lay the finish line and the pillory in the shape of an "F".

But now a written test was in process and we were not scared! Alexander Karlovich winked at us encouragingly. We recalled what he had said. Indeed! We all thought hard. Everything seemed simple enough. There were two travellers, A and B. A was gradually catching up with B. And we had to catch up with the "B's", too.

Chubarkov entered the classroom. His heavy tread and jingling spurs made Alexander Karlovich hiss angrily and stare pointedly first at his boots and then at us. The Commissar unbuckled his spurs and tiptoed to his seat.

"Who's getting the upper hand?" he whispered to Forsunov.

"They've just started."

The Commissar gazed at us fondly. Fifteen minutes passed in complete silence. I was coming along nicely, with no accidents on the road. Beanpole had filled two pages. Stepan's notepaper was still blank. Kostya Beetle had half-risen from his seat to re-check what he had written. He had solved the problem. He was the first!

Suddenly Hefty raced down the aisle. He loomed over the judges' table and held his paper on high. He was triumphant. Forsunov accepted it doubtfully. Hefty had the answer right.

"Well?" the Commissar asked.

"That's that!" Hefty replied. The boys waiting outside in the corridor applauded wildly.

Once again Hefty had come out on top.

After the bell had rung the judges checked our papers and announced the winners. Eight members of the "A" team had solved the problem, but only seven of the "B" team had. Our side had won. We had not only caught up with the "B's", we had overtaken them. Besides, our classmate Hefty was now the

school's math champion. Though he was very heavy, the boys threw him up into the air as a sign of homage to a victor. In the process something fell out of his pocket.

Beanpole bent down to pick it up and shouted, "Look!"

"Damn fool," Hefty muttered. He tried to snatch whatever it was from her. "Give it back! I was only doing it for your sake anyway. If that's the way you want it, to hell with you! Go on and lose. See if I care."

Beanpole was holding a small booklet. The title page read: "Key to all problems in *Algebra II* by Shaposhnikov and Valtsev."

"Traitor!" Labanda shouted and rammed his fist into Hefty's face.

The return blow sent Labanda flying.

It took Chubarkov and Mokeich to hold Hefty back. Forsunov then said that the "A's" had not overtaken the "B's", but had caught up with them. We shared both glory and sugar.

THE RED DINNER-MISSERS

Our school had become a true nomad, forever moving from one building to another.

We were forever dragging desks, bookcases, globes and blackboards through the streets of town. The traffic coming our way was made up largely of stretchers and hearses. The terrible camels of Tratrchok, the mobile unit of the 4th Army, pulled the hearses. The streets smelled of carbolic acid, for an epidemic of typhus had swept the region.

Commissar Chubarkov was on the go day and night. His unshaven cheeks had become so hollow it seemed he must certainly bite them when he spoke. He was in charge of moving the hospitals and doubling up the various offices. He also helped us drag our school property from place to place. Chubarkov was here, there and everywhere.

"And that's that!" his voice would boom on Atkarskaya Street, on Kobzarevsky Street and on Breshka Street. "Hang on a while! It won't be long now! And then, boys, the trees and the mountains will dance. Like the saying goes: It's not much fun to see the ram butting Sam, but it'll soon be the other way around, and Sam'll be butting the ram. That's a fact!"

Late one afternoon he came to another new school address. He was hoarse, his eyes were sunken and red-rimmed, and yellow specks of crude tobacco stuck to his lips. He smelled strongly of carbolic acid.

"Comrades! I've come to ask you to donate some of your time." He spoke with difficulty. "They sounded me out about it at Headquarters, and I said that my boys would surely do it, 'cause even algebra was like snapping their fingers

to them. I told them you knew how to figure out all the unknown quantities, so's make them known. So, boys, who wants to help the revolution?"

"I do!" we shouted.

"That depends on what it is," Hefty said and looked at his watch.

Chubarkov then said that we would have to put up big posters in the barracks and on Breshka Street, warning everyone about typhus, and that it was a rush job. The new shipment of posters had not arrived from Saratov, and all the ones on hand at HQ had been put up. That meant we would have to make the posters ourselves. There would have to be a big figure of a louse and a caption written in large block letters.

He had brought along a roll of grey wrapping paper and water colours.

It was deathly cold in the classroom, for the school was not heated, and it was five o'clock, time for us to have gone home long ago.

"I'd have done it myself, but I'm no good at drawing, that's for sure. And you can't even draw a louse if you've no talent for it. Zoya, here, and Stepan and Lelya have. I saw them draw a picture of me on the blackboard once. Oh, yes, I did. And it was a real good likeness, too. No mistake about who it was."



"Let's do some drawing from life," Stepan suggested craftily. "If any of you don't remember what they look like, Hefty here will lend us a few. His are nice and fat."

"That'll do, Gavrya!" Alexander Karlovich snapped. "I suggest you start working instead of wasting time."

"This is a special emergency drawing lesson, fellows!" Stepan shouted.

"It's late."

"It's too cold in here."

"It's time to go home." This voice came from Hefty's corner. "It'll be like it used to be, being left after school with no dinner."

"You don't say?" I jumped onto my desk. "Listen, fellows! Who wants to stay after school today as Red volunteer dinner-missers, to draw the fight typhus posters? If anybody thinks he's back in the Boys School, and left after school, he can get out! Well? What do you say?"

It was awfully cold. And we were awfully hungry. It was going on six o'clock. Hefty scooped up his books and left. He was followed by some of the others, who tried not to meet our eyes as they filed out. There were not many of them. The best boys and girls stayed on, and Labanda, Kostya Beetle and Beanpole Zoya were among them.

We lit the oil wick lamps. The Commissar got a fire going in the bow-legged iron stove and took out the paints. We spread the paper out on the floor and set to work on the project. There were no paint brushes, so we made do with bits of paper rolled up tight and painted the fine parts with our fingers. Most of the letters were shaky. Thus, "typhus" looked as if its knees were buckling. The insects were much more impressive, although Stepan and Kostya Beetle had an argument as to the exact number of legs and feelers needed.

"Ha! Your name's Beetle, but you don't even know how many legs it has!" Stepan said.

We put it to a vote and decided not to be stingy about the legs. Soon we had fuzzy centipedes slithering all over our posters. We crawled about on the cold floor. The commissar, who was dead tired after a long day, helped us in every possible way: he laid out the paints, cut the paper and thought up slogans for the posters. He had a terrible headache. We could hear him moaning softly every now and then.

"Why don't you go home, Comrade Chubarkov?" we said. "Look how tired you are. We can manage without you."

But he would not, no matter how we coaxed him. He even managed to keep up our spirits by telling us what a wonderful job we were doing.

Stepan and I had gone off into a corner to compose a caption in verse. We had a hard time with the unruly words, but then all of a sudden the pieces seemed to fall into place and the caption was ready. We thought it was excellent and felt that the Commissar would like it, too. We carried it over to him proudly. It read:

*When all is neat and clean,
No louse is ever seen.
Lice lay you flat.
And that's that!*

The Commissar stared at it blindly. He mumbled something and swayed strangely at the desk.

"Why can't they meet?" he whispered. "They should. That's for sure."
"Who?"

"Them. A and B. The travel... lers."

Alexander Karlovich bent over him anxiously. The Commissar was burning up with the dread fever called typhus.

THINGS LOOK BAD

Chubarkov was dying. We could speak of nothing else in class.

When I came home Oska was waiting for me in the hall. "They've sent the Commissar away to camp for three days so he'll get well quick. I heard Papa calling headquarters. And he said camp for three days."

"What are you talking about? You've got everything mixed up again. And you know, it's not funny any more."

"Honest! I heard him."

Papa returned from the hospital just then. His eyes were so serious that Oska, who would usually begin to climb all over him, hung back. Papa took off his coat. The hall was immediately filled with the smells of the hospital.

Then Papa went off to wash up, with us trailing behind. He scrubbed his large doctor's hands thoroughly with soap as he always did and brushed his short nails with a nail brush. Then he gargled his throat, throwing back his head so that the water seemed to be boiling in his throat.

We stood there watching the procedure that was so familiar to us both. Neither of us said a word. Finally, I spoke.

"Why did Oska say you sent the commissar away to camp, Papa?"

"Which camp? Don't talk nonsense."

"But that's what you said. I heard you," Oska insisted. "You said: 'Camp for three days'."

Papa chuckled ruefully. "Silly! He's getting camphor injections. Understand? Every six hours. Because his heart is so weak," Papa explained, turning to speak to me as he wiped his hands. "We can't get his temperature down, and he's terribly undernourished. The man had been killing himself at his job. And goodness knows what he's been eating. That's what we're up against."

"It's very bad, isn't it?"

"It's worse than bad." Papa spoke brusquely and tossed the towel over the headboard. "Our one hope is his natural strength. We'll do our best."

"Will he be sick long?"

"It's typhus. Who knows? We're expecting the crisis soon."

The moment I entered the classroom on the following day I was surrounded by my friends and some of the older pupils. They had all been waiting for me.

"When's the crisis? What did your old man say?"

But the crisis had not begun, and the Commissar's fever kept rising every day, while his strength ebbed with each passing hour.

Would it really be "that's that", as the Commissar himself would have said in such a case?

Stepan and Kostya would rush off to the hospital after school each day to ask about Chubarkov's condition. But what could the nurse on duty say? He had a raging fever. He was unconscious and delirious.

Things looked bad.

YES AND NO

I heard the phone ring in my sleep that night. I was completely awakened by a loud pounding on the front door. Then I heard Stepan's voice saying:

"Honest to God, Doctor. I was just there. They chased me out. His heart's nearly stopping. He's having that, what-d'you-call-it? The nurse said cry-sis."

"Shh! Not so loud, you'll wake everyone up! They've just called me. I'm on my way there now. I don't want any panic. A crisis means a sharp drop in temperature. What is it, Lelya?"

I stood there wrapped in my blanket, but my teeth were chattering from nervousness.

"I'm going with you, Papa."

"Are you crazy?"

"Why can Stepan go?"

"If Stepan thinks he's going anywhere, I'll tell the nurses to throw him out. I don't believe anyone asked you to take part in a consultation."

Papa dressed quickly and left, banging the front door behind him. Stepan, feeling completely disheartened, stayed.

The long, cold hours of the night dragged on endlessly, Oskan woke up. When he saw Stepan sitting on my bed he sat up on his own, but at the sight of two fists, mine and Stepan's, being shaken at him, he darted under the blankets again. However, I could see his curious eye flash and knew he was not sleeping, but listening to our every word.

"Do you think he'll pull through?" Stepan whispered.

We spoke of our Commissar at length. He really was a wonderful man. And most of the fellows and girls at school were on his side now, because he was fair and always stood up for justice. He took care of our troglodytes good that time, and there was a reason why Alexander Karlovich respected him so.

"I know he wants to go off to fight. He volunteered, but they wouldn't accept his application. They told him they needed good men to work for the revolution on the home front, too," Stepan said.

"If he ever does go off, things'll be awful again."

"That's for sure. He's on our side, but he's a mean one for discipline. And if he goes off...."

We suddenly fell silent, crushed by one and the same idea: how could we be discussing whether he'd go off to fight or not when now, at this very moment, our Commissar was fighting for his life. Perhaps.... The pendulum of the old wall clock in the dining-room swished back and forth loudly and menacingly: "Yes—no ... he will—he won't...." It was as if it were telling his fortune, ticking off one second after another, as one did the petals of a daisy.

"Yes—no ...he will—he won't."

Just then a key turned in the lock. I could hear Papa taking off his rubbers. Stepan and I dashed into the hall.

We were afraid to ask, and it was so dark there that we could not see the expression on my father's face.

"Why aren't you asleep, night owls?" Papa grumbled in the darkness, but he did not sound angry. On the contrary, he sounded triumphant. "All right, all right. I know what you're going to say. Well, I think he'll make it. Your Commissar's sleeping like a baby. Something I hope you'll both be doing in another minute. Off to bed with you! I'll be going on my rounds in another two hours."

" 'Hoo-ray, hoo-ray,' they all shouted, the Schwambranians." Indeed, this one time they had every reason in the world to.

A DIFFERENT STARING GAME

The Commissar was getting better! But he was still very weak. The day before he had finally been discharged from the hospital and moved to a room in a house that had once belonged to a rich merchant. Stepan had been to see him. Now we all crowded around Stepan to hear his report.

"He said that when he was delirious he kept thinking about those travellers. You know, about A and B. The ones in the algebra problem. Remember? He said he annoyed everyone to death there, asking them why those men couldn't meet. They kept on travelling and travelling, and when they finally did meet he started getting better right away."

"That's because he was probably thinking about us all the time, and what with the high fever and all..." Beanpole Zoya said, sounding very grown-up.

"Sure. They only let me visit him for ten minutes. There's a hospital nurse on duty there. All he kept saying was: how are things in school? And are we behaving well? And how's Alexander Karlovich making out all by himself? And is Hefty doing any better in algebra?"

Everyone turned to look at Hefty. His face became crimson. He shrugged his big shoulders and was about to say something nasty, but his eyes met Stepan's and he turned away.

"So what I say is let's take things easy for a while and not fool around too much," Stepan said. "If he starts getting upset I know it'll be the end of him. Ask Lelya if you don't believe me. That's what the doctor said. Didn't he? So let's not pull any pranks for a while. 'Cause anybody who does might get a good crack on the head. I'm warning you. Am I right. Beetle?"

"You bet. After all, we're human beings. And you'd have to be a pretty low-down louse to make him sick again. I mean you, too, Hefty."

"You just worry about yourself." Hefty sounded hurt. "Aren't you all such little darlings!" He shoved Labanda out of the way and left the classroom.

"The Commissar asked me to bring him something to read," Stepan said. "I went over to your house, but your brother wouldn't lend me anything. He said wait till you get home. Will you give me a book? I'll take it over."

"I can take it over myself."

I wondered what kind of book the Commissar would like. While I browsed through the shelves, Oska said, "Stepan asked for ... uh ... I forgot the name. Kristomonto."

"What?"

"Wait. Let me think."

He knitted his brows and puckered his lips. "Oh, I know! He didn't say Kristomonto, he said Sacramento. That's it!"

"There's no such book. The Mennonites who come here from out-of-town sometimes curse like that. You know: 'Donnerwetter, sacramento!' It's like saying, 'For God's sake!' Well, what was the book Stepan wanted?"

"He said it was about a count, and there's a gun like it," Oska prompted.

Ah! Now I knew. It wasn't Kristomonto, and it wasn't Sacramento, It was Monte Cristo! *The Count of Monte Cristo*. But I didn't have that book. Then, true to my Schwambranian taste in books, I chose a volume of Greek mythology and *Robinson Crusoe*.

I wrapped the two books carefully in a sheet of old newspaper and went off to visit the Commissar.



The Commissar's room was very poor. A newspaper was spread out on the table instead of a cloth, and the spout of a tin kettle protruded from under a quilted jacket that had been thrown over it to keep it warm. A soldier's mess tin was cooling forlornly on the woodstove that had gone out. There was a small stack of books on a bamboo bookstand. The title of the one on top was: "Political Literacy". The only item of luxury in the room was the bed. It was so wide you could lie across it, the headboard and footboard were scalloped and upholstered in bright carpeting. Why, this was no bed, it was a two-horse sleigh! It had probably belonged to the merchant. Portraits of Karl Marx and Lenin were tacked to the peeling walls. A large poster printed in heavy type hung on the wall over the bed. It depicted a Red Army man in a cloth helmet with a five-pointed red star on it. No matter from which angle I looked at the poster, the soldier seemed to be staring straight at me, and his finger seemed to be pointing straight at me as he asked in the stern, demanding words of the caption: "Have you volunteered for the Red Army?"

I didn't feel too sure of myself to begin with. No one had met me at the door. The hospital nurse was apparently gone, and I had to knock several times before I heard a very faint voice that was apparently the Commissar's say: "Come in."

The Commissar's hair was cut very short. He had lost so much weight you could see his bony shoulder through the outsized collar of his cotton shirt. He smiled at me weakly and somewhat shyly.

"Hello. Well... now that the doctors are through with me, I see the doctors' sons are taking over. That means I should be getting better. That's for sure. Well, how are you crocodiles coming along?"

He asked me all about life at school. Then I read aloud to him from the Labours of Hercules, trying to put the right feeling into my voice, but as I read

of the nine-headed Hydra of Lerne whose heads Hercules chopped off, one after another, I got carried away by the story. I had chosen this second labour of Hercules, because I had often heard speakers at mass meetings refer to the rabid, many-headed hydra of the counter-revolutionary forces. And so I read on of the hero who defeated the fierce monster and let out' its poisonous black blood.

The commissar was asleep. He had probably fallen asleep in the middle of the story. His broad but bony chest rose and fell evenly. I sat there, not knowing what to do. Should I leave? It somehow seemed impolite to do so. Should I go on sitting there? That was silly. And then, who could tell how long I would have to wait?

It was very still in the room, the only sounds being those of the Commissar's breathing and a feeble crack now and then from the cooling tin kettle on the table. The Red Army man on the poster had not for a moment taken his burning gaze from me, and his finger pointed directly at me. But now I, too, could not take my eyes from him. It was pretty much like our staring game in school. However, his hard eyes bored through me so relentlessly I felt I was going to blink and lose.

"Water," the Commissar whispered, though his pale eyelids did not even flicker in his dark, sunken sockets.

I rushed to pour some water into a mug. The tea was still warm. I held the mug as he drank. He opened his eyes a bit and looked at me gratefully.

"Pour yourself some tea. It's only carrot-tea, though. And there's no sugar. They won't let me have saccharine. They say it's no good for your kidneys, not after typhus."

I didn't want to offend him and so poured myself some of the cloudy brew. It had a burnt taste, it was not sweet, it was tepid and tasteless. A plan was forming in my mind. I would carry it out the very next day.

I raised my eyes over the rim of the mug as I sipped and glanced cautiously at the wall opposite. The Red Army man was still staring at me, but he couldn't make me feel uneasy any longer. I knew what I had to do.

SUGAR AND TEA

I went to visit the Commissar the next day. There were four lumps of sugar in my pocket, my school ration for that and the following day. The Commissar looked slightly better. His eyes were brighter, and when he smiled, the old sharp glint was back again, even though it came and went. When it did his eyes became dull again. That meant he was still very weak.

"I hope you won't be angry about yesterday and me popping off to sleep when you were reading. I'm not my old self yet, and my head feels fuzzy.

Besides, that was a pretty tall tale. I had a look at this other book you brought me, the one about Robinson. I like it better, though it's not what I'd care to read about now. I feel bad enough lying here all by myself. I want to get back out among people again. In times like these, every man counts, and here I am, like Robinson, wasting my time on a desert island. It's enough to make you sick! Well, that's that. It's time for me to be getting up and about. I put my feet down off the bed yesterday. Come on, doctor's son, give me a hand. I'll see how things go today."

"I don't think you should yet. Papa said you have to stay in bed till you're stronger."

"Never mind what Papa said. All those doctors and their medicines are meant for different, more delicate people. You know our kind. We're tough! Come on, let's not waste time talking."

He got his thin legs over the side of the bed by raising and moving each one by the knee with both hands. Then he stuck each foot into a felt boot that was standing by the bed.

"Now you give me some support on this side, and I'll hold on to the bed on the other. All right, here we go. You know the old stevedore's cry: heave-ho, heave-ho ... there she goes!"

He rose with great difficulty. I stuck my shoulder under his armpit. The Commissar took a step and fell over heavily on me. I barely managed to steady him and get him back into bed. He lay there panting, looking miserable and strangely pitiful.

"That's it, fellow. Taps. That's for sure. Go on home. What are you staring at? I said, go on home! Well? What is it? Think the Commissar's done for? You're mistaken, my boy! I'll show you some real walking yet."

A large tear made its way slowly through the stubble of his yellow cheek. I was really frightened. Our Commissar, our cheerful Commissar Chubarkov, so loud-voiced and hearty, a man who could out-holler any crowd, was sobbing softly in his bed, as the Red Army man on the poster pointed his finger at me accusingly and his eyes bored into me. But it wasn't my fault.

I rushed over to the table, poured some of the yellow brew from the kettle under the quilted jacket and slipped my two days' sugar ration into the mug. The Commissar held it in his trembling hands. He had calmed down a bit and took a slow sip. Then he licked his lips.

"I've never had anything so sweet! Seems like pure honey. How come?" He looked at me suspiciously. Then he peered into the mug. The four lumps had probably not dissolved completely. "So you decided to pamper me? I'll bet you put your whole week's rations in here. You should've left yourself a lump. Now you'll have to drink yours plain again."

I hastily poured myself a full mug of brew from the kettle, took a sip and was dazed. A molasses-thick, sickeningly-sweet syrup stuck to my lips. It took me a few moments to realize what had happened.

"Was anyone here to see you today?" I asked.

"Indeed! I'll bet your whole class was here. Kostya, Labanda, Zoya and Stepan, of course. They were all here. They lit the stove and boiled the kettle. But they didn't feel like having any tea. What's the matter? Why aren't you drinking yours? See, I said it wouldn't be any good without sugar. Well, if you're not going to have it, we might as well try walking again. Give me a hand. I think I feel stronger after your brew. Come on, give us a hand here!"

The Commissar leaned on me and tried learning to walk again.

THE WANDERING SCHWAMBRANIANS, OR THE MYSTERIOUS SOLDIER

Our wandering school moved from one place to another, and Schwambrania wandered along with it. The turbulent events in the life of Pokrovsk and our school naturally affected the internal affairs and geographical location of the Big Tooth Continent. There were constant disorders in Schwambrania, because it was forever changing the order of things in the country.

Lice had come out from hiding in Pokrovsk and had become official. Typhus had put red crosses on everything. Oska insisted we have a death toll in Schwambrania, too, and I had to agree. The statistics of real-life situations called for a death toll in Schwambrania. That was why a cemetery appeared there. We then went over the list of Schwambranian kings, heroes, champions, villains and seafarers, and spent a long time deciding whom we would bury. I tried to limit the death toll to such insignificant Schwambranians as the former Royal Water-Carrier, or the Master of Foreign Affairs. But my bloodthirsty brother would have nothing of the kind. He demanded great losses, as was only true in real life.

"What kind of a game is it if nobody dies? They just go on living and living! Let somebody die who we'll feel sorry for."

After long deliberations Jack, the Sailor's Companion died in Schwambrania. The cruel Count Chatelains Urodenal had filled his kidneys with stones. As he lay dying. Jack, the Sailor's Companion, exclaimed, leafing through the last page of the conversation manual: "Je vais a.... Ich gehe nach.... Ferma la machinal Finished with engine!"

He then departed, and though he wanted to wish everyone well, there were no such words in the manual. A brass band played at his funeral. There were life buoys instead of wreaths, and a gold anchor and visiting card adorned his grave.

Despite the terrible loss, the constant changes in climate and politics, the Big Tooth Continent extended across our every thought and deed.

The Black Queen, Keeper of the Secret, pined away in cobweby loneliness behind the brass gate of the seashell grotto. Schwambrania lived on.

One day Oska came hurrying home from school. He was terribly excited, for a soldier had come up to him on the street in broad daylight and asked for directions to Schwambrania. Oska had become so confused he had run away. We set right out to find the mysterious stranger, but there was no trace of him. Oska said that maybe he was a real live lost Schwambranian. Naturally, I made fun of him, reminding him that we had invented Schwambrania and all, its inhabitants. Still and all, I noticed that Oska had begun to sort of believe in its actual existence.

PRIMARY SCHOOL SCHWAMBRANIA

Schwambrania soon became known to Oska's classmates. From the very start he had made a name for himself in school. One of the boys had asked the teacher where sugar came from.

"I know," Oska had replied. "Sugar comes from school."

That was the day Kocherygin, the temporary principal, was keeping the children in check, since the botany teacher was absent. "That's where it comes from," he said. Then Oska said that sugar came from kerosene which spurted up from the ground.

Kocherygin seemed stumped. The next day he told the children that he had looked into the matter and learned that saccharine came from the ground, but from coal, not kerosene. However, he regarded Oska with new respect.

Oska immediately took advantage of this and drew the outline of Schwambrania on the large wall map in the classroom. Since the geography and botany teacher was still absent, Kocherygin took over once again. His finger suddenly got lost in the mountains of the Big Tooth Continent.

"What country's this?" he said, pointing to the strange land. "Hm? Anybody knows?"

Nobody did.

"It's Schwambrania," Oska teased.

"What's that?"

"Schwambrania!" Oska became serious.

"Never heard of it."

"I did. A soldier I know even left for there yesterday."

"How come it's not in the book?" his classmates demanded.

"It's not on the map yet, because it's a very new country."

"Go on, tell us about it," Kocherygin said.

And so Oska went over to the big map and spent the rest of the lesson talking about Schwambrania. He spoke in detail of the flora and fauna of the Big Tooth Continent, and his classmates listened with bated breath to his story of the wild 1 rum-toddies who inhabited the canyons of the Northern Candelabras. He told them of the wars against Piliguinia, of the overthrow of Brenabor, of the adventures of the deceased Jack, the Sailor's Companion, of the evil deeds of Chatelains Urodenal. Kocherygin was quite pleased with the Schwambranian geography lesson.

Oska returned home in the best of spirits. He was beaming. "We're studying about Schwambrania in school now," he said proudly.

I nearly collapsed.

However, the very next day Kocherygin brought a very embarrassed Oska home. He was holding Oska's hand, trying to talk him out of his Schwambranian fantasy. A group of his classmates followed, shouting "Schwamp! Bramp!" The new principal told our parents of Oska's strange idea of geography and asked them to somehow influence the stubborn Schwambranian. Oska sniffled and spoke of the mysterious soldier who had asked for directions to Schwambrania.

A few days later Oska and I were out for a walk. Two poorly-dressed young peasants came up to us on the square. They were carrying knapsacks. We were overcome by a terrible premonition.

"Listen, boys, can you tell us how to get to Red Army Headquarters? We're looking for Captain Schambardin."

So that was who the mysterious soldier had been looking for!

ENTER FROM THE STREET

Typhus rolled along the streets in step with the even tread of the stretcher-bearers and pallbearers. Typhus raged in the delirious cries of the stricken and was a murmur in the funeral corteges. The Tratrchok camels pulled the hearses.

Our school was moving again.

Schwambrania dashed about in search of a stable policy, changing rulers, climates and latitudes. Our house alone stood steadfastly at its moorings at the same old latitude and longitude. It had rusted and sunk into the riverbed and was no longer a boat but heavy, stranded barge that had turned into an island. Storms had not yet invaded it, since Mamma was afraid of draughts and kept the windows closed.

Still, some changes had taken place. Papa now wore an army field jacket instead of a morning coat. The red cross on his breast pocket signified that he was an army doctor. He was attached to the casualty-clearing station. Then, the people who we had once been told were undesirable acquaintances and had only

come up the back stairs were now all coming to the front door. Even the water-carrier, who, it would seem, would save time and effort by coming straight into the kitchen, now rang the front doorbell insistently. He trudged through the apartment, leaving puddles and wet tracks, and his pails were full of dignity.

Oska and I welcomed this degradation of the front hall. A draught of disrespect had now been established between it and the kitchen. We could now strike out the first point on our list of the world's injustices (concerning "undesirable acquaintances").

The plumber and the carpenter were the first to ring the front doorbell after the revolution. Annushka opened the door and asked them to wait while she went to tell Papa that "two men wanted to see Comrade Doctor".

"Who are they?" Mamma wanted to know.

"Well, sort of men," Annushka said. (She divided all of Papa's patients into gentlemen, men and peasants.)

Papa went out into the front hall. "There's something we'd like to discuss," one of them said.

"What seems to be bothering you?" Papa asked, for he thought he was a patient.

"They've no sense of duty," the plumber said. "The town council closed down the hospital under Kerensky, and that means the working people won't get any care when they need it. We've been appointed commissars."

Papa could never forgive Kerensky, because during his short reign in Russia the rich, tight-fisted town fathers had closed down the municipal hospital, saying, as they usually did, "No need for it."

And now two Bolshevik commissars had come to see him and tell him that the Soviets had decreed that the hospital was to be opened immediately and that Papa was to be in charge of it.

TRIAUNTS

Papa asked the commissars to have tea with him. After they had gone, he paced up and down humming happily, "Marusya took some poison, to the hospital she'll go."

"This is a real government! It's showing good cultural sense. How can you even compare your Constituent Assembly to it? It was just like our district meeting. 'No need for it' on a nation-wide scale."

"Your Constituent Assembly" was said especially to spite my aunts. At the time, starving aunts seemed to have descended upon us from all over Russia. One had come from Vitebsk the other had escaped from Samara. The Samara and Vitebsk aunts were sisters. Both wore pince-nez on black silk cords and

looked very much alike. Papa had nicknamed them the Constituent Assembly. Oska and I nicknamed them Aunt Necs and Aunt Sary.

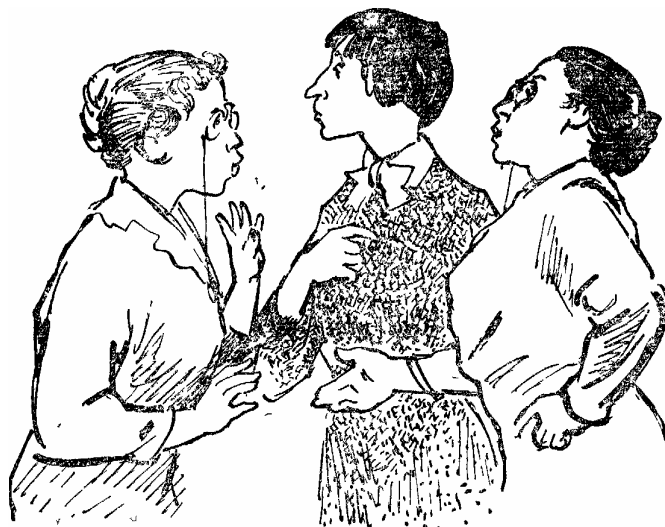
They were both terribly educated and spent hours discussing literature and arguing over politics, and if some of their information jarred with the encyclopaedia, they would say it was a printing error.

Then a third aunt arrived from Petrograd. She said she was as good as a Bolshevik.

"Will you be better'n a Bolshevik soon?" Oska asked.

However, months passed, but our aunt still did not become a Bolshevik. She was now saying that to all intents and purposes she was nearly a Communist.

The Petrograd aunt found a job at Tratrchok, while Aunt Necs and Aunt Sary both went to work for the District Food Committee. In their free time they told us "true life stories", had heated discussions and meddled in our upbringing. Our aunts insisted that we be tutored at home, for they were firmly convinced that the Soviet school system was detrimental to upbringing of a child from an intellectual family and to his sensitive personality (I believe that is the way they put it).



They took it upon themselves to tutor us, as they considered themselves authorities in the field of child psychology. Their constant admonitions exhausted us. They wanted to take part in everything we did, to play all our games. They were overjoyed when they discovered the existence of Schwambrania and said it was so-oo exciting and simply divine. They begged to be let in on the secrets of our world of make-believe and promised to be of help. Schwambrania was in danger of being overrun by aunts.

That was when the Schwambranian commanders played a trick on them. They led the aunts off into the heart of Schwambrania and there, during an initiation ceremony, painted them with water colours, made them crawl under

beds, locked them in a cave with wild beasts, which meant locking them in a storeroom with wild rats, and made them sing the Schwambranian anthem ten times in a row.

"'Hoo-ray, hoo-ray!' they all shouted, the Schwambranians," our tired, painted aunts sang in the darkness. " 'Hoo-ray!' Eeek! Something's crawling up my skirt! 'Hoo-ray, hoo-ray!' They were clouted! Do-re-mi-nians!"

However, when we then explained the rules and holds of wrestling and told them to wrestle without breaks or a time limit to a final victory, our poor aunts became indignant. They said Schwambrania was a crude game and a stupid country, unworthy of well brought up boys. This was why the famous Schwambranian poet (obviously inspired by Lermontov) wrote the following stanza in his Aunt Noces' autograph book.

*Three lively aunts all live in our apartment,
Thank God there are no more in this department!*

THE WORLD AND THE INDIVIDUAL

"Your father's an intellectual, but he's all right," Stepan Atlantis said. "You can see he's on our side. And you're an all-out sympathizer. One of your aunts has an idea of what's going on, but those other two are awfully backward." He was leaving our house after a two-hour long discussion on the individual and society.

The Constituent Assembly aunts used such long words that I caught my Petrograd aunt sneaking off to the dictionary every now and then to look up unfamiliar "isms" and "substances". According to my first two aunts, the free intelligent self was the core, and everything else revolved around it. And whatever the self believed, was so. Whatever it wished things to be was the way they were, and to hell with everything else! Stepan, however, argued that, like the saying went, you didn't call off a wedding if one guest was missing. He said that the group, with everyone pulling together, was the main thing. As for the self, if it got too stuck-up you could always catch it by the collar and give it a good shake. My aunts replied that Stepan and I were crude realists, believing only in that which everyone could see and feel. Realists were also called materialists. They believed that the world undoubtedly existed and governed all ideas and individuals. But my aunts did not agree with this. They got terribly excited and even shouted. They said the world had no right to order free ideas and the individual around, because, they said, perhaps the world would never have existed without ideas. Yes, undoubtedly, only the reasoning individual existed. Perhaps everything else existed only as it appeared to it, only as in a dream.

"Are we individual?" Oska wanted to know.

"As far as you yourselves are concerned, undoubtedly," Aunt Sary said.

We thought this was a great idea and decided it would all come in very handy in Schwambrania.

Indeed, what if we were really Schwambranians and Pokrovsk, our school, home and the revolution were all a part of some dream? We were stunned by the very thought of it.

Our aunts sat down on the couch and Aunt Neces began reading aloud from a Russian history book: "The Vikings, Rurik, Truvor and Sinehus came to rule Ancient Rus."

Oska and I decided to have a look at Schwambranian history, meanwhile, and began singing, throwing chairs around and making as much of a racket as possible. Our aunts asked us to be a little more considerate. They said it was a lack of respect for the individual.

"Our individual is dreaming that you're not here at all," Oska said.

"Maybe we just imagined you?" I added.

Our aunts spoke about our behaviour to Mamma. She came in to have a look but we were doubtful of her existence as well. Mamma burst into tears and spoke about our behaviour to Papa.

"What sort of nursery solipsism is this?" Papa demanded. "I'm going to suddenly imagine that the two of you have been sent to stand in a corner at this advanced age."

We were given no dinner. Papa said that, after all, the soup was only a dream, and Oska and I were such free-thinking individuals, it wouldn't take any effort on our part to imagine that we were full, while he said that he recalled dreaming that we had had our dinner and had even said "thank you". In a word, we had to accept the fact that our soup was not an idea but reality, and that there were millions of other individuals except ourselves, and that we could not exist without them.

AROUND THE SUN

The self had been tossed out of the centre of the universe as far as we were concerned. We were caught up in the great whirl of events in school and on the street. However, the centrifugal forces could do nothing about the state of affairs at home. Our home staunchly remained the reliable core of our existence. We felt that everything else was whirling around it like some great and dangerous merry-go-round. Such was the case until the day on which a stocky man appeared in the front hall during Papa's office hours. He had on a pair of black boots protected by galoshes and a holster, and carried a briefcase. Annushka said it was one of the commissars.

"Sorry to inconvenience you, but I'm going in next. I'm here on business," he said to the patients in the waiting room. "We're all here on business!" "Who does he think he is?"

"He thinks he's a gentleman," a fat farm woman said. A sack on her lap moved, and a live duck-offering quacked inside it.

Water splashed in the washstand in the office. Then the door opened and a man came out, buttoning his shirt collar. The Commissar went right in.

"Good day. I'm sorry to bother you, coming in out of turn, but it's revolutionary duty, Comrade Doctor. You see, I'm here as the Commandant of Pokrovsk."

"Sit down, Comrade Usyshko," Papa said, recognizing the shoemaker who had formerly made all our shoes and had often borrowed books from Papa's library. "What's the good news these days?"

"You'll have to move to another apartment, Comrade Doctor. Tratrchok is expanding. They don't have enough space any more. I'm sorry to bother you, but you'll have to move in two days."

"Well. They've finally got to me," Papa said to himself. Aloud he said, adjusting his breast-pocket flap with the red cross on it. "I'm going to protest. Comrade Usyshko. I won't let anyone throw me out so high-handedly in two days' time, as if I were some bourgeois. I believe that the working intelligentsia has the right to expect a more considerate approach on the part of the government with whom it is working in complete contact."

"All right. I'll give you an extra day, but no more. I won't argue about that contact part. And I've personally found you a fine place on Kobzar Street. It's in Pustodumov's former house. A fine apartment. And we'll take care of the moving."

"You understand that I'll have to see it first."

"As you like. We don't charge any for looking. So I'll send the wagons over on the sixth. I'll be going now." As he turned, his eyes fell on Papa's shoes. "You still wearing them?"

"Yes!" Papa said angrily.

"How's the left one? Not too tight? Remember, I said it'd only be tight at first and that it'd stretch?"

"To be frank. Comrade Usyshko, I think you were better at that job, ah...."

"That depends which way you look at it. Comrade Doctor." The Commandant chuckled. "You used to order your shoes, but now some things, if you'll pardon my saying so, aren't done to your measurements any more. Maybe some things don't fit very well."

The news of the coming move stunned Oska and me. We saw that centre of the world had shifted, and history was not made according to the wishes of our home.

Copernicus' contemporaries had most probably found themselves in the same predicament. They had always believed that Man was the centre of the Universe and that the Earth was the centre of Creation. Then they were told that the Earth was only a speck among thousands of similar planets, and that it travelled around the Sun, governed by forces that were not of its creation.

TOWARDS A NEW GEOGRAPHY

A most unusual caravan was moving along Breshka Street. Ten camels of the Tratrchok were carrying our possessions.

The drapes and curtains were rolled up like campaign banners. The dismantled beds, adorned by shiny brass knobs, clattered and jangled like a collection of maces belonging to a Cossack chief. The armoured coats of the samovars gleamed. The large pier glass spread out like a lake, with Breshka Street splashing in it upside-down. The innerspring jelly of the mattresses jiggled. A set of hobbled bentwood chairs jostled and trotted atop another wagon like a little herd of colts.

The piano in its white cloth cover rode along in an upright position. Seen from the side, it resembled a surgeon in a white smock, but from the front it was a steed wearing a horse-cloth. The merry driver had one hand on the reins and the other stuck through the slit in the cloth. He was poking at the keys, trying to pick out a simple tune as the wagon rolled along.

Our belongings looked indecent. The washstand and sideboard, which had always been upright, lay on their backs with the doors gazing at the sky. Passers-by stared at us. Our personal, private life was bared to all eyes. We felt uneasy and wished we could renounce it all. Papa walked along the sidewalk, as if none of this had anything to do with him, but Mamma walked bravely on at the head of the procession, right behind the first wagon, as wan and unhappy as a widow following the pallbearers. She was holding a list of our belongings, quite like a list of the dead for a church service.

Oska walked ahead of us, carrying the cat. Annushka sat on a high pile of things on the first wagon like a maharaja atop an elephant, and the front of a potted palm served as a fan. She was holding a stuffed owl. I came next, carrying the precious grotto and its chess-piece prisoner. Schwambrania was moving to a new geographical location.

A line of aunts brought up the rear.

The new apartment greeted us with a hollow chill. A taunting echo mimicked us.

The drivers were busy moving our heavy bookcases. Papa poured some pure alcohol into a measuring glass, added water and treated the drivers to it. I could hear the men talking.

"It goes right through you!"

"It's the best medicine! Castor oil for your brains. Cleans them out in a flash."

"Get over on the other side. Look at all them books! What do they want with so many?"

"You think it's easy poking about in somebody's insides? It takes a lot of reading, maybe a thousand books, and then you can make a mistake and sew up the wrong thing."

Our aunts tracked along behind the drivers to see that they didn't pinch anything, for, as our aunts said, nowadays people were very free and easy with other people's possessions. There was an elegant chandelier with a fringe of glass beads in one of the rooms. It had been left behind by Pustodumov. My aunts stood admiring it.

"Well? I see you've put up a chandelier," the commandant said, for he had just arrived on the scene. "That's some fine light! I'll bet it came all the way from Petrograd."

My aunts seemed embarrassed. As I opened my mouth to tell him whose it was, my Aunt Noces stepped in front of me, blocking me like a screen. "Yes, you're right. It was made in Petrograd," she said quickly.

After he had gone my aunts explained rather sheepishly that what they had done was right, since Pustodumov would never get it back anyway, and the country would manage without it.

THE POWER OF POSSESSIONS

The rooms were no longer as hollow-sounding, for our furniture muffled the echoes. We found a cosy corner for the Queen's grotto that we could turn into a circus, railroad station or prison.

Schwambrania was re-established.

Papa climbed the stepladder and stood there, hammer in hand, to hang up a portrait of Doctor Pirogov and a portrait of Lev Tolstoy by the Academician Pasternak. Papa was making a speech. The ladder was his rostrum.



"Today I had occasion once again to see that we are all the miserable slaves of our possessions. This tremendous pile of junk has us in its power. It has bound us hand and foot. I would have gladly left half of all this behind! Children! (Take that nail out of your mouth this minute, Lelya! Haven't you ever heard about hygiene?) As I said, children, learn to despise possessions!"

Then Oska and I went off to the dining-room to hang up a hand-painted plate in bas-relief. Sticking up from the surface of the plate was a castle and knights on prancing steeds. The nail came loose, sending the plate crashing to the floor. The knights perished. The castle was in ruins.

Papa came running at the sound of china breaking. He shouted at us. He called us vandals and barbarians. He said that even bears could be taught to handle things carefully. He went on to enumerate a long and woeful list of things which we had annihilated: the black queen, his cane, fountain pen, etc., etc.

We sighed. Then I reminded Papa that he had just told us to despise possessions. At this he hit the ceiling. He said that one should first learn to take

care of things, then to earn the money to buy them, and then only could one begin to despise them.

That evening Mamma wandered about desolately. She had made a list of all the small things, so as not to misplace them and then waste time looking for them. She had been searching for the list for over an hour.

THE FOLLOWING OFFICIAL PAPERS HAVE BEEN LOST

The sand went slowly to the bottom in the stirred water of the fishbowl. Fish darted through the emerald-green water plants like brightly-plumed hummingbirds, swishing close to the green-glowing glass and feeling quite at home.

The walls of our new apartment had lost their chilling strangeness. The rooms were becoming lived in. The cosiness of our former home was transported to our new one. Gazing up at the chandelier during supper. Papa said, "The revolution ... (eat your carrots, Oska, they're full of vitamins!) The revolution is full of cruel justice. Indeed. Whom should this apartment belong to? A moneybags merchant or a doctor? Actually, I believe that the proletariat and the intelligentsia can find a common language."

"Goodness! Aren't we all Communists at heart!" my aunts exclaimed.

The following day our piano was rolled away.

A gala event was being planned by the Tratrchok offices. An army choir was rehearsing a Red Cross Cantata. The choir needed the use of a piano for a week, and so they requisitioned ours.

Mamma had gone out. In her purse was the license, issued to her by the District Department of Education. It stated that she was a music teacher and verified her ownership of the piano. Papa made a small speech to the abductors on the subject of the intelligentsia and the proletariat, and also mentioned the need for mutual contact. However, this made no impression on them. Then Papa said that it wasn't a matter of the piano, it was the principle of the thing that counted, and that he would not sit idly by, but would go as high as Lenin if need be. Then Papa sat down to write a letter to the editors of *Izvestia*, a newspaper published in the capital.

They carried the piano out like a body at a funeral, with Annushka bewailing its fate and my aunts dropping copious tears.

When Mamma returned and learned of what had happened she sank down on a chair and blinked rapidly. Then she spoke very quickly, saying: "Did you take out the package?"

At this Papa, too, plopped into a chair. My aunts seemed petrified. We then learned that Mamma had tied a little bundle to the inside of the piano top. It

contained four pieces of expensive toilet soap and a sheaf of now-worthless, pre-revolutionary paper money. It was Oska's and my turn to become terror-stricken now, for a week before we had seen Mamma tying up the little bundle and had decided that she would hide it in a very safe place. Since we, too, had quite a few things that were to be kept in secret, we had stuck a sheaf of official Schwambranian papers into the bundle when Mamma had gone out of the room. Our sheaf contained maps, secret campaign plans, Brenabor's manifestoes, coats-of-arms, letters of famous men, metaphorical posters and other secret manuscripts from the Schwambranian chancellery. Now all this had been carted off to Tratrchok. Schwambrania was in danger. The piano tuner might discover our cache.

Mamma rose, wiped her eyes and set out for Tratrchok. I said I would accompany her. She was very touched and did not suspect that we were on our way to salvage Schwambrania's valuables.

THE SHOW AT TRATRCHOK

When we got to Tratrchok Mamma told a commander who had a drooping moustache that she had to remove a package of personal letters from inside the piano. He winked at her meaningfully, said "Aha! Love letters!" and told her to go right ahead.



The piano was in a large hall. It seemed to be crouching fearfully in a far corner. Red Army soldiers sat around on the benches, chewing on sunflower seeds. Two men were sitting on crates by the piano. They were trying to play "Chopsticks". They stopped when they saw us. Mamma went over to the piano and caressed the keys with a delicate, rippling scale. The piano whinnied like a horse that has recognized its master. The soldiers stared at us. The commander untied the package, winked at Mamma again and again said, "Love letters".

" 'Hooray! Hooray!' they all shouted," I hummed as we left the Tratrchok premises.

As we were crossing the square, someone behind us shouted: "Hey, Madame! Come on back!"

It was the commander. He was out of breath from running when he reached us. Mamma trembled as she pressed the package to her breast. At that moment an earthquake shook Schwambrania.

"Come on back, lady. The boys are awfully mad. They say you spoiled the piano on purpose, so it won't be of any use to us. They say you took something out of it and now it's ruined."

"You're talking nonsense! That's probably because none of you know how to play."

"You're wrong there. It was all right until you took that package out. So you'll have to come back and tie it inside again."

We trudged back to Tratrchok.

The soldiers greeted us with an angry rumble. They crowded around the piano. They were shoving and shouting, saying that Mamma had spoiled national property on purpose, that this was sabotage, and that people got themselves shot for being saboteurs.

"Take it easy, boys," their commander said, but we could see he was also upset.

Mamma strode over to the piano. The soldiers stopped talking. She played a chord, but the piano did not respond with its usual fine sound. The sound it made was dull and barely audible. It rose and died away like some distant thunder.

Mamma looked at me. She was aghast. Then she brought her hands down on keys as hard as she could, but the chord was a whisper again. The soldiers, however, roared.

"You spoiled it! She did it on purpose!"

"It's the soft pedal!" I cried, guessing what the matter was.

When the commander had pulled the package out he had tripped the soft stop, lowering the strip of felt onto the strings. Mamma yanked at it and the piano responded with such a loud chord it was as if cotton wads had been removed from our ears.

The soldiers beamed. They asked us to tie the package back inside the piano again, just to make sure. We did, but the piano did not sound any louder. We were then told we could have our package back. The shamefaced young soldiers asked Mamma to play something lively.

"I don't play polkas, comrades," Mamma said acidly. "You had better ask my son."

They did and I clambered up onto a crate. I was surrounded by beaming faces. As I could not reach the pedals from my high perch, one of the soldiers volunteered to help. He depressed it carefully and kept his foot on it all through my performance. I played every single march, polka and ditty I knew, and all of them as loudly as possible. Some of the men were soon tapping in time, and then, suddenly, a young soldier dashed to the middle of the room, spread his

arms wide, as if he were going to embrace someone, and tapped his foot gingerly, as though to test the floor. Then he began to dance inside the wide circle that formed in an instant. He tossed his head and stamped as he danced. Then he began to sing a ditty in a clear voice:

*It's a pity, it's a shame,
It's an awful darn disgrace!
See the bourgeois and their dames
Crawling out from every place!*

The commander cut him short. Then he turned to Mamma and said in a very polite and respectful manner: "Madame, I mean, as we now say. Citizen, would you please play us something yourself? Something more inspiring. The boys and I would all appreciate it very much. Say, some overture from an opera."

Mamma sat down on the crate. She wiped the keys with her handkerchief. My pedal specialist offered his help and foot again, but Mamma said she'd manage herself.

Mamma played the Overture from "Prince Igor" for them. She was very serious and played exceptionally well.

The soldiers stood around the piano in silence. They followed her fingers with rapt attention, leaning over each other's shoulders. Finally, Mamma removed her hands slowly and gently from the keyboard. The last chord drifted up in their wake like a wisp of cobweb and then died away.

The men all moved back as she raised her hands, but were silent for several seconds after. It seemed they were listening to the last, fading notes. Then only did they begin clapping wildly. Their arms were extended as they clapped, and they held their hands close to Mamma's face, for they wanted her to see that they were clapping, not merely to hear them.

"A great talent. No doubt about it," the commander said and sighed.

We had once again reached the middle of the square, but the applause coming from the porch of Tratrchok continued. Mamma listened to it modestly.

"You can't imagine the ennobling effect music has on people!" she said later to my aunts.

"You can't ennoble such people. If they'd been ennobled, they'd have returned the piano," Aunt Sary said.

A month later, after the piano had long since been returned, the following lines appeared in the "Replies to Our Readers" column of *Izvestia*:

*To a Doctor from Pokrovsk
Your piano has been illegally requisitioned as it is a means of livelihood.*

Papa was jubilant. He carried the clipping around in his wallet and showed it to all his friends.

When Stepan Atlantis found out about it, he said, "Was that your piano they wrote about in the paper? Hm! You sure spread it all over the country! That's what private ownership does to you!"

THE COMMISSAR AND THE KINGS

The secret package was now tucked away into a drawer of Mamma's desk, and the desk was now a part of the furnishings belonging to one of our neighbours, for we now shared our apartment with others, having had three of our rooms borrowed in succession. Chubarkov, who was recuperating, was given one room, something that pleased us both immensely.

"Now we can be like Robinson Crusoe and Friday," he said, unbuckling his belt and holster and laying them on the table. "Will you lend me the book?"

"Sure!" I examined the gun. "Is it loaded?"

"Sure. Don't touch it."

My aunts peeped in, examined the Commissar's broad shoulders and uptilted nose critically and departed with an indignant sniff. "No manners at all! He's a regular martinet!"

The Commissar winked in their direction and said, "They don't look too happy."

"They never are," I said.

"But we are," Oska said.

"That's that then. If boys like you are, I'll make out." Chubarkov smiled fondly. Then he lifted Oska up and sat him on his knee. The blue cloth of his narrow breeches was stretched tight. "Anybody here play checkers?" His question was unexpected.

"That's no fun. Chess is much better. Do you play chess?"

"No. Never had a chance to learn."

"Lelya'll teach you quick. He knows all the movings. The white ones, and the black ones, and the back and front ones, too. All I know is how the horse moves." Oska jumped down and began hopping in the squares of the linoleum. He stopped suddenly, stood on one foot and said, "We put a queen in jail. We put her away in a kennel long ago, when there wasn't any war, but there was a tsar. That's how long ago!"

I glared at him, and he said no more.

In order to cut short this unnecessary and risky conversation, I suggested that the Commissar and I have a game of checkers. He took a printed checkerboard from his knapsack and dumped the checkers out of a little pouch. Then he set them up, and we bent over the cardboard field, forehead to forehead.

"Your move," he said.

In no time I saw I was up against a serious opponent. The Commissar would send his pieces into the most unexpected squares with a light flick of his middle finger. He set up traps and made two-for-one shots, scooping my checkers up lightly and saying as he did, "Haven't had time to learn chess yet, but I know a bit about checkers. What are you doing? Look here! You'd better jump or I'll huff, that's for sure. Ah, that's better. Now here's where we plaster back your ears. And reach the king row. My king. And that's that."

Five minutes later I found myself with one blocked piece on the board. It was a disgraceful defeat.

I immediately set up the pieces again and suggested we have another game. Ten minutes later my last two pieces were blocked in a corner. The Commissar had rolled himself a cigarette and was cheerfully blowing thick clouds of smoke at that unhappy corner.

CAT-AND-MOUSE

Oska was crushed by my defeat. He decided to try his own hand against the invincible Commissar.

"Do you know how to play cat-and-mouse?"

"Cat-and-mouse?" The Commissar sounded genuinely puzzled.

"I'll show you," Oska said and got up on the Commissar's lap again. "You put your hand out like this, and I'll try to slap it. But you have to yank it away, so's I don't. If I miss, it's your turn to slap me. We all play it in school."

"Let's give it a try." Chubarkov laid his huge hand, the hand of a stevedore, on the card table.

Oska took aim. He raised his left hand but quickly brought down his right. Slap! The Commissar did not have a chance to yank his hand away.

"What'd you know! You tricked me that time! Let's do it again. I think I've got the hang of it. Go on, try again!"

Oska repeated the manoeuvre, but his palm came down hard on the table, since Chubarkov had yanked his hand away at the very last moment. "Aha!" he said and seemed very pleased with himself. "Now you put down your paw."

PAPA SHOWS PROMISE

A short while later someone knocked and Papa entered. We quickly removed our puffed hands from the table and hid them behind our backs, for they were as red as a goose's feet and itched badly from the Commissar's slaps. However, Papa must have heard something of what was going on from the hall.

"What's wrong with your hands, boys?"

"Oh, Papa! Come on in! We're playing cat-and-mouse. The Commissar's real good at it, too. Even better than Vitya Ponomarenko."

"He's a real sharp fellow, your Oska is," the Commissar said and he sounded a bit embarrassed. "You have to keep your eye on him all the time. But he cheats. He hits you in mid-air, and that's against the rules."

"No, I don't! I don't cheat! You're real sharp yourself!"

"This is abominable! Look at your hands! It's unhygienic. Pardon me for saying so. Comrade Commissar, but my children are used to more intelligent games. This is no way for them to be spending their time."

"They're getting hardened," Chubarkov said, trying to stick up for us.

"It's good training! You have to have a good eye and be quick."

"Nonsense! What a thing to be proud of! You don't need any brains for this kind of a game."

The Commissar looked at him slyly. "I wouldn't say so. Doctor. It seems easy when you're on the sidelines, but it takes some brains. Why don't you try?"

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not."

"That's a pity."

"Come on, Papa!"

"He's scared! Papa's scared!" Oska shouted.

Papa shrugged. "I don't see what there is to be afraid of. And I don't see that you need any brains for it, either. But if you insist. Well...."

"That's that," the Commissar said and put his huge paw on the table. "Your turn, Doctor."

Papa raised his white, antiseptic, surgeon's hand high into the air. He shrugged disdainfully again and smacked the empty table top in the place where the Commissar's hand had just been lying, but had been suddenly whisked away.

We were ecstatic.

"Well, Doc? You still say there's nothing to it?"

"One minute. That didn't count. One minute, please. I think I'm beginning to see what it's all about. Very well. You put your hand here, and I hit from here. Excellent. All right, let's try it again."

The Commissar, keeping a wary eye on Papa, placed his hand on the table. He was ready to jerk it away in a flash. Papa made several false moves, and each time Chubarkov's hand jerked slightly. Then Papa pinned down the Commissar's hand with a sudden loud slap.

"Oho! You sure have a surgical sledge-hammer," Chubarkov said and rubbed his swelling hand. "You'll make a good player. But you won't catch me napping again, that's for sure."

"Come on, put your hand down. I have another turn. Wait a minute!" Papa took off his jacket and pulled up a chair. "We'll see who's the smart fellow here. Aha!"

When our aunts peeped into the room several minutes later they were flabbergasted. The Commissar and Papa were sitting at the table, one with his shirt out over his breeches and no belt on and the other in his shirtsleeves. They were taking turns slapping each other's hands soundly, missing and slapping the table top.

"Got you!" said the Commissar.

"Aha!" Papa boomed.

Oska and I were hopping around excitedly, egging them on, though they were quite carried away with the game as it were. The little table creaked and swayed under their blows.

The sacred rules of propriety hammered into us by our aunts were creaking and rocking as well.

ACQUAINTANCES, DESERTERS AND DRAUGHTS

An elegant army man who wore laced boots moved into the second room. He carried in his suitcase, examined the room, cleaned his nails, beat a tattoo on the table with his finger-tips and said, "So".

"You can always tell a gentleman," my aunts, who had been watching him stealthily, decided and entered to greet the newcomer.

The gentleman jumped up, kissed their hands in turn and gave each of the three one of his gilt-edged visiting cards. The name on the card was Edmond Flegontovich La Bazri de Bazan. The fine type in the lower left-hand corner read: "Marxist".

Despite his fine-sounding name, Edmond Flegontovich La Bazri de Bazan turned out to be completely non-Schwambranian in character. He actually did exist, though, and was well known in Pokrovsk. La Bazri de Bazan first appeared in town shortly after the revolution and became the editor of the *Volga Stormy Petrel*, a small newspaper published in Pokrovsk. He became famous after he printed a banner headline on Christmas, greeting all the readers on behalf of "the 1918th anniversary of the birth of the Socialist, J. Christ". The following day the paper had a new editor. At the time in question, La Bazri de Bazan was on the Tratrchok staff. He held the rank of aide-de-camp for special missions, but since he was chiefly responsible for arranging lectures, shows and debates, he soon found his rank unofficially referred to as "aide-de-camp for special intermissions". The soldiers nicknamed him Bags-and-Sacks.



The Committee to Combat Desertion set up its headquarters in the third room, and penitent deserters trooped in and out all day long. They trekked in guiltily to the committee, but since they usually took the wrong turn in the apartment, they would as often as not lay their guilty heads on our tables and windowsills. They wandered through the rooms and held meetings in the kitchen. In the mornings they would tramp into the parlour without knocking and wake Oska and me and our aunts, who slept on the other side of the wardrobes that divided the room. Our aunts would appeal to their consciences, but the deserters would assure them that they were no strangers and would not hurt anyone, after which the men would curl up by the door and go to sleep. Whenever a little girl came for a piano lesson, they would crowd around the piano and follow her rippling fingers up and down the keyboard admiringly. "Just look at that!. No bigger'n a baby, but watch those fingers go!" they would say.

Strangers kept drifting in and out of every door, but they all seemed to be desirable acquaintances. Mamma soon got used to the draughts. The draughts drew the red flags in through the windows. The house became a thoroughfare, with the corridor serving as an extension of the street. For some reason or other, no one noticed the gate, and so they passed through our apartment to reach the back yard from the street. Day and night typewriters clattered overhead in the army office on the second floor. One night they clattered louder and faster than usual, and in the morning we discovered that the people upstairs had been testing a new machine-gun. Tin pails clanged in the yard near the tethering post. Hardened deserters who were under arrest sat around on the porch railing. Sentries walked up and down with measured steps. Oska hopped and skipped along behind them, trying to keep in step and looking very intent as he shouldered his toy gun. He would peep into Bags-and-Sacks' windows as he paraded back and forth, since our manuscripts were locked up in the desk there. Oska was guarding Schwambranian property.

THE MARQUIS AND THE MARTINET

The Commissar was reading his way through the third volume of the encyclopaedia before going to bed. He had already read the first two volumes and intended to go through the entire set. My aunts despised him in their hearts and cautioned me against being too friendly with, as they referred to him, a martinet. However, Oska and I tagged along after him whenever we could. We accompanied him to the stables to groom the army horses and shared his dream of big ships.

Bags-and-Sacks' room reeked of perfume. Cuff links, little bottles, boxes, wine glasses, cigarette holders and nail files were scattered all over the windowsills. There was a photograph of Vera Kholodnaya, a popular silent screen star, on the wall. Bags-and-Sacks was polite. He always stepped aside to let someone pass in the cramped corridor and often clicked his heels. My Petrograd aunt said he was certainly more like a marquis than a Marxist. The marquis entertained every evening. His visitors were ladies in uniform and men in civilian clothes, the ex-town fathers and ex-volunteer nurse's aides. Bags-and-Sacks' guests were very noisy. A guitar twanged mournfully far into the night, while he sang in a grating voice of the King of France playing chess on the parquet floor with his jester. Aunt Noces would wake up and sigh.

"He's a very fine gentleman," she said. "It's certainly no fault of his that he has neither a voice for singing nor an ear for music. I simply can't understand why he insists on singing."

One day La Bazri de Bazan got the Commissar drunk. Chubarkov kept refusing, but the marquis kept coaxing him to drink. "Go on, drink up. The proletariat has nothing to lose but its chains."

After a while the Commissar came into our room in his stocking feet with the straps of his breeches dangling. "I'm nearly through with the third volume, Doctor, but what's the use? I guess hauling sacks is my limit. That's for sure." And he kneeled over. When someone tried to help him to his feet he jumped up and dashed out into yard. Five minutes later he entered from the street. He was tightly belted and every button of his tunic was buttoned. He was very official-looking. His spurs jangled. His face was strained and intent.

"Where's that Army guy who just made a fool of himself?" he rasped. "Lolling around drunk, disgracing our Soviet system. Where is he? He's under arrest! And that's that." He searched the room. Papa stood in front of the mirror, so the Commissar would not find himself. Before leaving, Chubarkov turned in the doorway and shook an unbending finger at everyone. "See it doesn't happen again! And that's that!"

THE SMELL OF SOAP

A terrible discovery was made one evening. La Bazri de Bazan had gone off somewheres and Mamma wanted to see if the package was still in the desk drawer. It was not. The precious package containing the worthless money and our manuscripts was gone, as were four bars of fine toilet soap that she had also kept there. They were all gone. The Schwambranian secrets had been pilfered.

Papa and Mamma went back to the dining-room. We were gathered around the table for a meeting of the family council.

"So that's what your marquis is like," Papa said.

"Impossible!" all three aunts protested. "You can tell he's from a good family. The Commissar probably picked the lock and requisitioned everything, as they say."

"Such audacity!" Mamma moaned. "And there was the soap, too. I couldn't care less for the money. It was just a pile of paper that should have been thrown out long ago."

"Why'd you hide it then?" I asked.

"Well, you never can tell...."

We sat around in silence for some time, staring at the oilcloth. It seemed that misfortune was spread out on the table like a dead fish.

Papa rose and said he would notify the authorities.

My aunts were aghast.

"You must be out of your mind! How can you complain to robbers about the doings of robbers? Why, they'll arrest you and shoot you!"

But Papa brought his fist down on the table and the Constituent Assembly said no more. Then Papa cranked the telephone.

"The Special Section, please," he said in a special voice. "It's busy? Then the Cheka."

"Shhh!" Aunt Necs said in a frightened voice. She was used to uttering these words in a fierce stage whisper.

Two men came to the house shortly afterwards. They were both tall and olive-skinned and both had small black moustaches. They were dressed in leather jackets and looked like drivers. Papa had informed Chubarkov that they were coming, and the Commissar joined them when they entered Bags-and-Sacks' room. The marquis was at home. He seemed taken aback for a moment, but then greeted the unexpected visitors with his usual familiarity. "Come on in. Prenez vos places, as they say. May I offer a little refreshment?"

They searched the room. The lost soap fell out of an overturned suitcase.

"It's ours," Papa said.

"I must disagree. It's mine," the marquis said.

The worthless paper money was mixed up with some other papers and charts. Oska and I exchanged glances.

One of the men leafed through the papers, reading aloud: " 'Letter to the tsar', 'Battle map', 'Guide to the city of P.' 'Secret Instructions', 'List of conspirators'. What's all this?"

"I don't know," the marquis replied. He had turned pale when he realized that this was beginning to smell worse than merely soap.

"How did you come by all this?"

"I don't know. My word of honour. None of this belongs to me. Nor the soap. I don't know a thing about it."

Chubarkov went right up to him and cursed through his teeth. It was very much as if he had spat in his face.

Suddenly Oska made his way through to the front. I waved him back. I rolled my eyes like a jack-in-the-box, but he paid no attention.

"That's ours! Tell him to give it back, 'cause it doesn't belong to him."

The two men were examining the charts. They exchanged glances.

"Mm?" one said quizzically.

"Uh-huh," the other agreed.

"Comrades!" I said. "My brother and I were playing, and we hid all this next to the soap. That's all there is to it," I said.

"We'll straighten it all out at headquarters," was the reply.

Then one of the men put through a call. "That you? This is Schorge. I've got him here. Yes, we found it. Yes, he confessed he stole it. But we found something funny here. Yes. The boys say it's theirs. Yes. I doubt it. What? Both of them? All right!" and the receiver clicked like a pair of heels. He then went over to Chubarkov and spoke to him. Chubarkov looked at us awkwardly.

"I'll tell you what, boys," the Commissar said. "Let's all go for a ride in an automobile. The chief has specially invited you over. He wants you both to tell him all about those papers of yours. And that's that. I'm going along for the ride. All right? Then that's that."

My aunts fainted like so many tenpins rolling over. I, too, felt a little queasy. ' A large automobile took us to the Cheka. The night rushed at us. Like true Schwambranians, we were anxious to reach the scene of adventure.

TWO SCHWAMBRANIANS AT THE CHEKA

The office was still. Two men were bent over our papers. The light of the table lamp was reflected on the shiny bald head of the fat man in eyeglasses. The other was a Lett. His blond eyelashes fluttered.

"Well, boys, sit down and tell us all about it," the fat man said. He seated Oska on his desk. There was a Browning gun on it.

"Is it loaded?" Oska asked matter-of-factly and then went back to his usual tone of voice. "Who are you? The chief chief? Are you? Then tell him to give us our papers. You know how long it took us to draw everything?"

"We'll do just that, but first I want you to tell us all about it from the very beginning. All right?"

The Lett's eyelashes fluttered again as he read our Schwambranian letters. I felt very ill-at-ease.

"This is just a lot of nonsense!" he said in an angry voice and handed the papers to the fat man, who looked them over carefully.

"Where's the city of P.?" the fat man asked.

"That's Port Folio. The port in Folio."

"And where would that be?"

"In Schwambrania," Oska piped up. "It's a make-believe country. My brother discovered it all by himself. We've been playing it all our lives."

"Your brother's a real Columbus, isn't he? Well, if it's only a game, why'd you hide all this?"

"So's it would be real secret. It's more interesting when everything's secret."

The chief was intrigued. He asked us to tell him all about Schwambrania. We began our story rather reluctantly, but were gradually carried away by our old game. We interrupted each other as we spoke of life on the Big Tooth Continent. We told them what the coat-of-arms stood for and all about the map. We enumerated all the members of the Brenabor Dynasty, described the wars, journeys, revolutions and tournaments, while Oska even recalled the name of the last Minister of External Affairs. We stood to sing the Schwambranian anthem and were about to argue over the last cemetery reforms when....



The chief was laughing. He was roaring, choking and wiping his tearing eyes. He slapped his bald pate and shook his head, but could not stop laughing.

The angry-looking Lett was laughing, too. His body shook, though his pale lips did not open and his eyes were shut tight. Something squeaked in his throat.

Oska and I looked at them reproachfully. Then we smiled. Soon we were laughing, too.

"Oh! You're better than a circus!" the chief panted. "I thought I'd die. Ah.... What did you call him? Brenabor? How'd you ever think of it? You had it all figured out! I haven't heard of anything so good in a long time." Then he suddenly became serious and said, "Do you find it very difficult to govern the country?"

"It's not too bad. We manage. But sometimes things get mixed up."

"Why'd you have to invent all that?"

It was a serious question. I took a deep breath and said, "We wanted everything to be beautiful. And everything really is in Schwambrania. All the streets are paved, and all the boys have big muscles. And parents don't interfere. And you can have as much sugar as you like. There are hardly any funerals, and you can go to the movies every single day. As for the weather, it's always sunny and it's cool in the shade. All the poor people are rich. And everybody's happy. And there aren't any lice at all."

"You're wonderful boys!" the chief said warmly. "We've got to make all these dreams come true. And we'll have paved streets everywhere, and big muscles, and movies every day. And we'll call off the funerals and outlaw the lice. Just wait! It's easier said than done, so we'll call off the dreaming and get down to work. I have no time to lecture you, not this late at night. Look at the younger Schwambranian yawning. He's opening his mouth so wide he might swallow the whole continent. And I'm sure your mother's worried. I'll phone her."

The chief took us home in his car. He let Oska toot the horn before we said goodbye. He laughed and said he was very happy to have met some members of the Schwambranian tribe. He said we should establish Soviet power in Schwambrania soon and then stop dreaming and help lay real pavements.

"What happened to Bags-and-Sacks?" I said, feeling that we were well enough acquainted by now for me to ask him.

"We'll send him off to ... uh ... what's its name ... Pi-li-guinika. You know, he invented himself, too. But he's a sleazy character and he was playing for money. Well, goodnights, boys! Happy Schwambranian dreams and good real times ahead!"

NEW VISTAS FOR ROAMING

We were soon asked to move again. This time we were given an apartment on Atkarskaya Street. It was very far from the centre of town. The centrifugal forces were at work.

The actual moving was not too much of a strain, for we had by then become used to all sorts of changes. The greatness of the Home (with a capital "H") had long since been debunked. Our belongings crawled shamefacedly into the crowded corners of our new place of habitation. Since there was not enough room for everything, a wardrobe and a table wandered off to our friends' house on the way.

Our moving coincided with new great changes in Schwambrania. Once again this island roaming in search of a single, common universal truth had undergone considerable displacement. After our visit to the Cheka we approached the goal of all our wanderings in the great wide world.

However, a new, an entirely new passion gripped Schwambrania. Three days later we decided that this passion was at last the truth.

It was the theatre.

The Lunacharsky Municipal Theatre was opened in Pokrovsk in the defunct Dawn Cinema. The troupe was made up of actors from Petrograd and Moscow who had chosen to forego future fame in the capital for satisfactory food rations in the provinces.

We were immediately captivated by the actors' names, which had a true Schwambranian ring. There was Enriton, Polonych and Vokar, for example. True, we later discovered that some of the names had simply been reversed, so that a very ordinary Rakov had become Vokar.

Kholmsky was head and shoulders above all the other actors of the troupe. He was a man of many talents whom I met in Moscow several years later, when he was the manager of the popular Theatre of Satire. Kholmsky played either villains or Napoleons. Besides, he was the playwright and designer. The City Council commissioned him to do the murals for the new theatre. Soon the walls were covered with centaurs, troubadours, muses, prophets and such like. Kholmsky was a man who was easily carried away and was liable to run to extremes. He bundled some of his painted characters into suits of mail, but had not a scrap of covering left for the others. He coloured their bodies purple, which was wholly in keeping with the freezing temperatures inside the unheated building. Kholmsky drew Venus de Milo at the entrance. He added a pair of arms at the suggestion of the council members. The inscription on the pedestal was: "Sow ye all kindness and wisdom eternal! Sow ye! The people will thank you sincerely."

The people of Pokrovsk did not like his work.

"He's supposed to be a Party man, but he's gone and drawn a bunch of naked people. You'd think the theatre was a bathhouse!" the audience complained.

Our Petrograd aunt turned out to be a great theatre-goer, and she took us to every single premiere. In no time we were able to recognize the members of the troupe, both coming and going. We were mesmerized by the theatre. We liked everything about it: the gong, the intermissions, the line at the box office.

At the time, the theatre resembled a railroad station, and the curtain was often delayed, as were the trains. The floor was littered with butts and sunflower seed shells. The audience sat bundled in winter coats with raised collars. The applause was wild, no matter that gloves and mittens muffled the sound. All through the performance the inclined floor of the hall shook lightly and emitted a rumbling sound. This was the people in the audience tapping their feet softly to keep their toes warm.

"The heat is excruciating! There's not a breath of air!" the queen on stage fumed as she fanned herself, though steam escaped from her mouth in the cold air and she had on a heavy quilted jacket under her flimsy robes. The prompter's whispering steamed upwards from his booth.

The audience reeked of disinfectant. We were doused with the foul-smelling liquid before going to the theatre and were inspected by candle light in the front hall upon returning.

SCHWAMBRANIA FOR GROWN-UPS

The Constituent Assembly sometimes went to a play and then spent the rest of the week criticizing it. Aunt Sary was nearly run out of the theatre once. The curtain had just gone up, and there was a strong draught from backstage. My aunt's voice complained from the front row: "There's a draught! Shut whatever it is!" She said this loudly as if the curtain, that magic veil that separated the two worlds, was no more than a window.

The audience was truly offended.

We were dying to go backstage. Grisha Fyodorov, an influential, kind soul and the son of the troupe's hairdresser, took us to that workshop of wonders. We were stunned at the sight of the unbelievable, crude props, the toy fruit and sackcloth scenery. But we gazed in awe at the grown people who played at other people's lives every single day. This was better than Schwambrania.

There was a painted inscription in the hall over the stage that read:

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE, AND ALL THE MEN AND WOMEN
MERELY PLAYERS

(Shakespeare)

This quotation became the new motto of Schwambrania.

The Schwambranians took to the stage. The world was now divided into actors and audience. Daytime in Pokrovsk was like a drawn-out intermission.

"Art takes one's mind off one's dull, uninteresting life," my aunts said. "It transports one into a world of beauty."

They argued heatedly and nearly quarrelled when they discussed the actions of the various characters in the previous evening's play. They accused these invented personages, defended them, loved or hated them, exactly as Oska and I did when we played Schwambrania. That was when we decided that the theatre was Schwambrania for grown-ups. They were very serious when they played their game.

Once, during a performance of *Sunset*, the lights went out. The play continued by the light of kerosene lamps which sent sooty streaks across the painted sky. The action was drawing to a close. The father had decided to kill his daughter and had picked up his revolver.

At that very moment I noticed that the lamp closest to the wings had begun to smoke badly. The flame appeared as a tiny fountain over the rim of the lamp glass. The father walked towards his daughter. The flame reached the edge of the sackcloth pavilion. The father raised his gun. The scenery was about to catch fire. The daughter wrung her hands. I am positive that many other people besides myself were aware of the fact that the faulty lamp might at any moment set fire to the scenery. However, the daughter fell to her knees and no one said a word. They were afraid to spoil the murder. Schwambrania reigned in the theatre. The father cocked his gun.

The scenery began to smoke.

"Die, wretched woman!" the father exclaimed.

"The lamp's smoking!" I shouted, breaking the spell.

The nimble actor was up to par. He turned the wick down with one hand and killed the ingénue with the other.

The theatre was saved. However, no sooner had the curtain come down than the people sitting next to me began scolding, saying that the theatre was no place for boys, that I might have waited before I shrieked, and that now, instead of a murder, they had seen a stupid comedy, and they were sorry they had wasted their money on tickets. In my heart of hearts I had to confess that for the first time in my life I had betrayed Schwambrania.

THE MEANING OF MITAC

There were two things that had been bothering me for several years. These were an old locomotive that had sunk into the ground on Skuchnaya Street and

the mysterious charm-word "mitac" which had been a part of Annushka's card trick.

Now, at last, I discovered the meaning of "mitac". A simple street sign held the answer. It proved more knowledgeable than the teachers in my old school or the encyclopaedia. I couldn't believe my eyes when I read the word "MITAC" on one of the houses on Breshka Street, now renamed Communard Square. I ran over and read the following: "Municipal Institute of the Theatre and Cinema".

Pokrovsk was captivated by the theatre. Everybody and his brother was now an amateur actor. Tratrchok, the Department of Education, the Food Committee and Volga Shipping all had their own troupes. Theatrical studios mushroomed. Finally, all the small studios joined forces to become MITAC, which then established a children's studio. Since our school was closed down, Oska and I enrolled. Stepan Atlantis and Taya Opilova soon followed our example.

We were rehearsing a play called *Prince Fork de Forkos*. The prince was in love with a princess, but the queen, her mother, was very proud and a bad lot in general, and so the prince was shown the door. Then he broke the spell that had been cast over a mushroom, and a fairy came out of it and gave the prince an apricot. The queen ate it, and her nose began getting bigger and bigger. Meanwhile, back on Rodos Island, where the prince lived.... In a word, the plot was very involved.

Taya Opilova was the princess. Both Stepan and I wanted to be the prince. We nearly quarrelled over the part, because the prince was supposed to declare his love for the princess, and the princess, we felt, would guess that these were not simply lines from the text. Kramskoi, the director, said Stepan would be the prince, since he was older than I and taller, and his voice was deeper. As if I couldn't talk in a deep voice if I wanted to!

We coaxed Forsunov into being the great magician. Grisha Fyodorov was our makeup man, as he was the son of a real hairdresser in a real theatre.

Our first performance was at the MITAC. I was the court jester and Oska was a gnome. His was a non-speaking part. We were both jittery. Grisha had made us up for our parts. The audience was buzzing impatiently out in the hall, and the sound seemed dangerous, mocking and mysterious. It was time to begin, but both Stepan and Forsunov were missing. The director paced up and down backstage.

"Curtain time!" the audience shouted and stamped.

The boys finally showed up. They were sober-faced and in a hurry.

"So long, Leva!" Stepan said. "All the Communists have been mobilized. We're being sent to the front lines. I'm a volunteer. I had a hard time making them take me. They said I was too young. But they finally did. Our train's leaving soon. Goodbye!"

Our hands met in a firm handshake. Stepan was silent for a moment, then cleared his throat and said softly, "I'll bet you'll be seeing Taya home alone now. Well, I don't mind if it's you. But don't let anyone else near her, hear?"

The audience was in an uproar. Forsunov went out in front of the curtain. He had on his knapsack. The audience calmed down. Forsunov adjusted a strap and said, "The performance has been postponed."

"Till when?" the people shouted.

"Till we wipe out the Whiteguards!"

THE MAN OF THE HOUSE

A day later Papa left for the Urals Front. Papa was heading into the thick of the typhus epidemic, for the dread lice had infested the trenches. Mamma and my aunts had packed three full suitcases for him. Papa took one. He joked unhappily, saying that he didn't need a thing, since they wouldn't put a burial mound over him and he didn't believe in the hereafter. Then, according to the old Russian custom, we all sat down for a moment of silence before the journey.

"All right," Papa said as he rose. He kissed each of us in turn. "You're the man of the house now," he said to me.

As he was leaving, he collided with a patient who was just entering. The man moaned and bowed to him.

"There are no more office hours. I'm leaving."

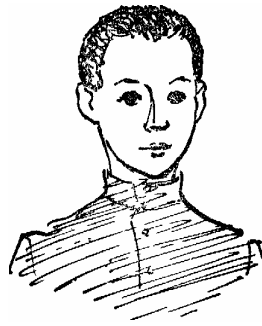
"Please, Doctor! It'll only take a minute! I can't stand the pain any more. And who knows how long I'll have to wait till you get back. You might even get yourself killed out there."

Papa looked at the wall clock, then at the man, and then at us. He set down his suitcase. "Take off your things," he said in an angry voice, ushering the man into the office. "Don't forget, seven drops after meals," he said to him ten minutes later as he got into the sleigh.

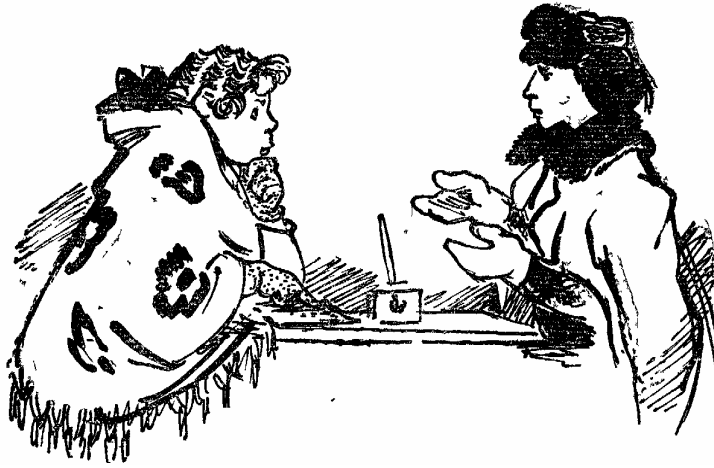
After the sleigh had borne Papa off, my aunts walked away from the windows and all three began to wail.

"No more of that, hear me? Dry up," I said rudely.

My frightened aunts stopped weeping. However, the stillness that had descended upon our suddenly empty house was still worse. I clenched my fists and left the room, my gait very much that of the man of the house.



ON TERRA FIRMA



SOME LESSONS TO US AND TO OTHERS

I don't recall how long it was after that, perhaps a year, but maybe only a month. There were no calendars in the stores, and so it was difficult to follow the passing of time, which had somehow lost its familiar quality. When my old Boys School uniform was traded for a slab of bacon, for instance, the days were swallowed up, as it were. Other, less filling days, dragged on like weeks. Endless, hungry weeks. Our daily schedule was quite unlike what it had once been. Before, dinner time had been the centre of the day's activities, the traditional hour when the family gathered, a solemn repast, a sacrament, the ceremony of partaking of food, the main meal, and the hours were counted off in terms of: "before dinner" and "after dinner". Now we often skipped dinner altogether. We ate whenever there was anything to eat. At such times Mamma would say, "Let's have a bite."

And we ate on the run, standing up, like people at a railroad station, since it was impossible to come in physical contact with the icy chairs. The apartment was freezing, and each of us gruded sharing the warmth he had hoarded up in his body with an inanimate thing like a chair.

We moved about, trying to avoid all cold objects, for they could snatch away some of our body's warmth. We took turns being the fire-tender. The one on duty would crawl out from under a pile of blankets and drapes in the morning, when the thermometer pointed to 5°. The day's fire-tender, his teeth chattering, would stick his feet into a pair of icy felt boots and start a fire in the pot-bellied stove. It would become red-hot and as the temperature rose, the inhabitants of our apartment would rise, too. The bare and empty sideboard greeted us with open arms. Our breakfast consisted of bland pumpkin mush, watermelon tea and saccharine.

Mamma was now a Music School teacher, but since the school had no facilities for practising, the lessons were conducted in our house. The little girls stepped on the piano pedals in their heavy felt boots and roused the chilly innards of the piano with their icy fingers. Mamma, dressed in her fur coat and gloves, would nimbly lift the stuck keys from under their fingers.

I, too, was a tutor. A buxom girl named Anna Kolomiitseva, who was older than I, came to the house to learn the three R's. The payment for these lessons was pound of meat a month. It was hard-earned meat. That's when I learned the real meaning of work. My pupil stubbornly refused to trust the letters of the alphabet, relying mostly on her own intuition. For instance, there was her own name, Anna.

"Aaa-nnn-nnaaa," she drawled. "Oh! It says Annie!"

One day we were tackling the word "parasol".

"Paa-raa-ss-sool," she stumbled along.

"Well? Read it all together," I said.

"Umbrella."

ON THE ROAD THERE

There—beyond sorrow's seas,
sunlit lands
uncharted.
Mayakovsky

After my pupil had gone, Oska and I went out to look for straw to heat the stove a bit. We made use of its quick-heating qualities to set out the dough for bread and took turns kneading the sticky mass with our ice-cold, swollen hands. The job called for frenzied effort, and we imagined that we were pummelling the hated guts of the enemies of revolutionary mankind, from Chatelains Urodenal to Admiral Kolchak.

In the evening we all gathered at the table. There was no electricity. The single nightlight was only put on on Sundays, which then truly became a special day. The weekdays were illuminated by an oil wick lamp with a twisted length of cotton for a wick. It was immersed in a cup of sunflower or linseed oil. A tiny flickering flame burned at the tip of the wick, filling the room with writhing black shadows.

My aunts moved the lamp closer. They sat in a row, stony-faced and somewhat unreal. The lamp cast a faint light on them. The Constituent Assembly resembled madonnas in pince-nez. My aunts read aloud in turn. Then they spoke of the wonderful past and our ruined lives.

"My God! What a beautiful life it was! Remember the Sobinov recitals and the literary magazines, and sugar was fifteen kopecks a pound. And now?"

"Aunts!" I said in a voice belonging to the man of the house. I sat in a dark corner that was now Schwambrania. "Listen to me! I'm asking you once and for all to keep your counter-revolutionary ideas to yourselves. It's no skin off my nose, but it's wrong to be a bad influence on small children." I would come closer to the table and glance meaningfully in Oska's direction. For some time now I was aware that I was maturing at a tremendous speed. This feeling of being responsible for the household, far from oppressing me, actually inspired me. I felt that I had become more logical in my thinking, that the necessary words came to me more easily, that I was more sure of myself in many ways. I looked reality in the face now without fear or reproach. Our straw patrol, frozen fingers and pumpkin mush did not dampen my spirits. The absence of a calendar, eating standing up and wearing our overcoats indoors made our way of life seem like something temporary and transient, like something that was happening at a railroad station. However, this was not but another stage of the Schwambranians' wandering. Life was moving in a definite direction, though the road was an unusually difficult one.

"Don't worry, Mamma," I would say on the days when there were no lentil beans, no kerosene and no letters from Papa. "Keep your chin up. Imagine that we're on a very long journey, travelling through deserts and over all kinds of high mountains. We're on our way to a new land. A wonderful land."

"Where to? Your Schwambrania again?" she would reply in a hopeless voice.

"No, not Schwambrania. A real land. Who cares about oil wick lamps and carrying straw, and frozen hands? Honestly, Mamma. Remember our undesirable acquaintances, Klavdia and Fektistka? Their whole lives were a hundred times worse than what ours are now for just this little while. It'd really be unfair if we'd go straight from one good life to another. We're just like passengers as it is, not helping in any way. And my aunts didn't even bother to buy tickets. They should be put off the boat. Papa's the only one, and even though I miss him, I'm glad he's doing his duty at the front lines."

My aunts were horrified. "Goodness! Just imagine. They've had everything! Even governesses! And look at them now! They're growing up to be Bolsheviks!"

I dreamed of the day Stepan returned. I would go out to meet him in my patched felt boots, carrying an armload of rotten straw.

"Hello, Stepan," I would say. "Give me five (but don't squeeze hard, my hands are swollen). See? I'm the man of the house now, and I've forbidden my aunts to talk like counter-revolutionaries. I'm rather hungry, but that doesn't matter. I'll gladly eat pumpkin mush till victory day."

"Good for you," Stepan would say. "Your thinking is all right. Hold out. Mush is as good as bread."

"But I don't want to be a passenger. I want to be a member of the crew!"

"Well, that's just what you'll be, a sailor of the revolution."

My daydreams broke off here, like a broken reel in the movies, for I did not know how to become a sailor of the revolution. And Mamma would never have let me be one, anyway.

A PERSONAGE OF GASTRIC ORIGIN

Still and all, Schwambrania lived on. It did not become any smaller territorially, though it now took up much less of our time than before. One day Schwambrania suffered a terrible blow. While we were out Mamma traded the seashell grotto and its prisoner, the Black Queen, Keeper of Schwambrania's Secret, for three litres of kerosene at the railroad station. Thus did we lose her forever. For half an hour we were frantic. The sun of Schwambrania was about to set for good. But that evening we turned on the lamp.

Playing Schwambrania at that time was mostly having imaginary feasts. Schwambrania was busy eating. It had dinners and suppers. It stuffed itself. We savoured the fine-sounding long menus we found in the cook book. We satisfied our raging appetites somewhat at these Schwambranian feasts. However, Schwambrania's sugar stores were only disturbed on holidays. Georges Borman was Head Chef of Schwambrania. We discovered him on an old ad for cocoa and chocolate. Georges Borman was the last of the Schwambranian personages, though he was a personage of gastric origin. He, certainly, could not cause any new errors.

In general, Schwambrania was on the decline. However, unexpected circumstances brought about a new flourishing of the Big Tooth Continent. These circumstances lived in a large deserted house on our street.

UGER'S MANSION

The house had been built by a slightly mad rich German named Uger. Uger's Mansion was one of the landmarks of Pokrovsk. People from out of town were shown it. They marvelled at it. It was indeed a most fantastic structure. The owner had been possessed by vanity and a consuming desire for luxury. He had decided to beautify Pokrovsk by putting up a unique building. He craved for fame. However, he did not trust the architect and so drew up the blueprints himself. Construction proceeded under his watchful eye. The house was three

stories high and had a basement. The people of Pokrovsk, all of whom lived in one-story houses, threw back their heads and counted the floors on their fingers.

Uger's Mansion was a cross between a prince's towered manse, a fairgrounds pavilion and the Hanging Gardens of Semiramis. The windows of one floor were unlike those of the others. There were tall, round, square and narrow windows. There were galleries with stained glass panels. Seen from the side, the house resembled a patchwork quilt. The entire pediment was covered with murals. Mermaids frolicked below, ships sailed along at the second story level, while generals of all sizes and shapes adorned the third. Under the eaves hunters in Tyrol hats were depicted shooting tigers and lions.

The house would jingle and buzz at the slightest breeze, for twenty-two weather-vanes and fifteen tin whirligigs spun and whirled on the turrets, while eight huge fans clanged as they turned in the windows. This clanging and jingling so puzzled the pigeons that they avoided the house, to say nothing of prospective tenants.

In the beginning, the Junior High School was located there, but the weathervanes and fans distracted the Juniors. A few heedless tenants tried to live there for a while, but the Hanging Gardens of Semiramis would sway whenever it was windy, the floors were springy, and the window frames creaked. The mansion began falling apart like a house of cards. Uger died of a broken heart. He was delirious at the end and said he wanted a weathervane and a fan for a tombstone.

Meanwhile, the house kept on falling apart bit by bit. The door jambs, banisters and sometimes whole galleries crumbled and disintegrated. The nearby houses all sported panes of stained glass. Weathervanes that had abandoned Uger's Mansion now spun on rooftops up and down the street.

When a blizzard hastened the process of destruction the neighbours would converge, pulling sleds. They would take up their positions all around the house and wait, sitting there like a pack of hyenas beside a dying lion. They dragged the fallen pieces of the house off to their own houses on their sleds, but did not have the courage to openly attack and loot this building that was of no use to anyone any longer.

ADVENTURES IN THE DEAD HOUSE

We knew that the huge dead house could be a new, convenient and mysterious place for our game. Soon Schwambrania moved into all the remaining rooms. Once again the game became fun. We were not at all dismayed by the fact that everything was wrecked inside. Schwambranians brought new life to the ruins, and the dead house put off the fall of Schwambrania for a long time.

A rustling, creaking and echoing filled the remains of the mansion, firing our imaginations. The wind swished up and down the rickety stairs. Fear haunted the dim, musty hallways, and terror crept along the walls at night.

This certainly was the best possible place for our Schwambranian adventures. We quickly surveyed the house, giving each room a beautiful name of a Schwambranian city. The country was being restored to life. However, there was one place we had not yet explored. This was a dark, suspicious passage that led to a basement filled with debris. We set out on an expedition to this uncharted land. Our equipment consisted of long sticks and a hanging votive light instead of a lantern. Then, following the best advice of our various camping books, we tied a rope around our waists, attaching ourselves thus to each other. We now looked like spelunkers.

We climbed down into the cave. The treads had long since fallen out of the staircase. We skidded along slanted boards and scrambled over loose bricks. I led the way. The light that was tied to the tip of my stick swayed in front of me. Oska plodded along behind. He was very staunch and brave, and, to prove it, he kept saying that he wasn't one bit scared, and that he actually felt quite cosy. Just as he was saying how cosy he was feeling for the sixth time, he fell through the floor. A rotten board had given way under him, and Oska fell into the basement. Since we were tied together, I was dragged to the very edge of the hole and pulled flat against the floorboards. The rope was very taut. It kept squeezing my waist tighter and tighter, cutting painfully into my middle.

"Did you fall down?" I shouted into the black hole.

"Not yet. I'm flying and flying, but I can't fall down to the bottom."

I lit the votive light, which had gone out during the accident, and lowered into the pit. There I saw Oska. He was suspended by the rope around his middle and was revolving slowly. He kicked and squirmed as he tried to touch the floor.

"Get me out of here, Lelya. It's awfully uncozy here. And the rope's so tight."

I started pulling my brother up, straining as hard as I could. Suddenly, there was a very unpleasant crack. The boards I had been lying on crumbled. I fell into the blackness and landed on top of him.

"See? I fell down to the bottom. And the rope's not tight any more." He sounded pleased.

The little light was smashed. Darkness billowed up around us in the cave. A dense, sour-smelling darkness filled the basement. Wisps of grey light filtered down through the hole we had made. When our eyes had become accustomed to the dark we noticed quite a few strange objects that had been concealed by the gloom. There was a crate on legs, some glass and metal vessels, and strangely twisted and spiralling tubes. We stumbled over some sacks filled to the top with something or other.

"It's hidden treasure," Oska said.

"A secret one," I whispered.

"This is big news!"

"It sure is! Real hidden treasure for Schwambrania! We'll set up a wonderf...."

A sudden beam of light hit the floor between us. We tried to scatter, but something grabbed us from behind and sent us sprawling. It was the accursed rope that had caught us by the waists and tripped us up. A hand pulled the rope towards a lantern. We saw a terrible mug above the lantern: a glittering upper lip, flaming nostrils and white lids. The other features of the mysterious face were lost in the darkness.

Then we heard a rough voice saying, "What the hell are you doing here? Hm?"

The upper lip glistened and "Why the hell are you here? I'll kill you, you brats! If I see you trying to give me the slip, I'll plaster you like a pair of puppies." Some terrible cursing followed.

"What are you yapping about?" I said, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

"You're not supposed to curse in the presence of children," Oska said. "Otherwise I will, too, and you'll be sorry."

The rope jerked, pulling us up to a huge fist that was illuminated on one side by the lantern. It then revolved expressively, displaying, as some menacing moon, all of its phases.

"Let go of the rope! Who said you could hold it like that? Who do you think you are?" I shouted.

"He thinks this is tsarist times," Oska added. "We'll tell the Cheka chief on you. He's a very good friend of ours. We'll tell him to arrest you."

"Don't you threaten me, you!" At this the huge fist was raised over Oska's head.

"Stop! Remove your hand, madman!" a voice piped up behind us. It sounded strangely familiar. "And take the chains off the prisoners," it continued in the same pompous vein. "Sit down, young wanderers. Greetings from an old scholarly hermit. What brings you to my cave, troglodytes?"

The fist disappeared. Now a bald pate gleamed like a lagoon in the light of the lantern. It belonged to E-muet, to the toadstool teacher Kirikov.

ELIXIR OF SCHWAMBRANIA

"Sit down. I recognized you. You're a member of the wild tribe. You're both sons of the great and noble land of Schwabria," Kirikov said.

"Schwambrania," Oska corrected him. "How'd you know?"

"I know everything. I live in the hallowed depths of your country, but in my free time, when I'm not occupied with scholarly research, I surface, O, Schwambrania, and the day before, and last week, I heard you playing among these pitiful ruins. What I mean is, when you became inhabitants of fair Schwambromania."

"Schwambrania," Oska said. He sounded annoyed. "What are you doing here?"

"And what's all this stuff?" I asked.

There was a long silence.

"O, Schwambranians, you have carelessly touched upon the one secret of my miserable life, a secret that gives me no peace of mind," Kirikov said in an echoing voice.

"Do you only have a piece of mind?" Oska inquired. "Do you live in the Iboney house?"

"My soul is pure, and my mind is clear, but I have been unjustly passed over by my fellow-men and the authorities. I am insulted and humiliated. But I am suffering for the good of mankind. If you swear you won't breathe a word of my secret to anyone, I will preserve your secret, the secret of Schwamburgia."

"Schwambrania," Oska muttered.

We swore we would not. Kirikov held the lantern up to our faces, and we solemnly pledged that we would preserve his secret to the grave.

"Listen, then, Schwambranian brothers! I am the last alchemist on earth. I am science's Don Quixote, and this is my faithful sword-bearer. I have discovered the elixir of universal joy. It makes the sick well and the sorrowing happy. It turns foes into friends and strangers into bosom companions."

"Is that your game?" Oska asked.

Kirikov snapped that his elixir was not a game, but a serious scientific discovery. We then found out that the cave was actually a laboratory where the elixir was made. The alchemist said that in a year's time, when the last experiments were completed, he would publish his findings. He would then completely renovate the house, have electricity put in, and would give us the entire top floor for Schwambrania. In the meantime, however, we had to keep quiet, no matter what. "I'm going to name my elixir of universal joy in your honour, my young friends. It will be known as the Elixir of Schwambardia."

"It's Schwamhrania. Schwambrania!" Oska shouted. "You can't even say it right. What kind of an alphysics are you?"



"I'm an alchemist, not an alphysics!" Kirikov sounded just as cross.

We visited the alchemist several more times. By the light of day Kirikov and his assistant Filenkin turned out to be very hospitable men. They told us of their progress and listened to the latest Schwambranian news with interest. The alchemist went so far as to help us govern the country. Schwambrania flourished.

They worked at night. Their secret smoke wafted up into the yard through a camouflaged pipe and was blown away. Sometimes we even chopped wood for their stove. However, they never once showed us the elixir, saying that it wasn't ready yet. One day we came to see them and found them in a very merry mood. They were singing softly and clapping warily. A fat woman in bright felt boots and a bright shawl was part of the party.

"See how happy she is? She just had the first drops of the elixir of world joy," the alchemist said. "This is Agrafena, I mean Agrippina, Queen of Schwambrania. We'll crown her, and lead her to the throne. Hooray!"

"We don't have any queen-ladies," Oska said glumly.

"He's right. We'd love to have her, but Schwambrania's a republic, after all. If she wants to, she can be the president's wife," I explained.

"All right then. She'll be the president's wife. Agrafe ... eh- mew-eh ... Agrip-pina, would you like to be the wife of the President of Schwambrania?"

"You bet!" said Agrippina.

DONNA DINA AND THE KINSMEN

A young girl who was our cousin came to stay with us. She was from Moscow and her name was Donna Dina, or Dindonna. Her real name was just Dina. Her black hair and flashing black eyes, which were as shiny as the piano top, and her teeth, which were as white and even as the ivory keys, had earned her the name of Donna.

Our aunts made sure that we understood we were to call her Cousin Dina. However, Dina turned out to be a regular pal and when she first heard us say, "Good morning, Cousin Dina," she burst out laughing. When she laughed everything about her laughed: her eyes, her teeth and her hair.

"Well, then, good morning, kinsmen!" she replied. "How do you spend your time, if I may ask?"

"In Schwambrania," Oska replied, for he felt drawn to her immediately. "And carrying straw. And we go out for walks. Will you go out with us?"

"With pleasure. I'm sure to lose my way here alone."

Even Oska had to agree that Dina was a beauty. She wore a real sailor's middy-blouse, given to her by a revolutionary sailor from Kronstadt. We thought that was wonderful. We escorted her around town. We showed her the ruins of Uger's Mansion, but did not say a word about the alchemist or his elixir. Dina wanted to know all about Schwambrania. She was a little puzzled by the fact that in such interesting times as these we felt a need for make-believe. She said it was a shame and high time we got down to real work. Our friendship blossomed during our long walks.

Young men would step aside politely to let Donna Dina pass. They nudged each other and looked after her. We could hear them saying what a good looker she was and beamed proudly.

Dina had only been with us for three days when, to our joy, she stepped on our aunts' toes, that is, hems. She criticized them for bringing us up in such an old-fashioned way, saying it was a crime to put a damper on the social feelings that churned and boiled within us.

"She's right! You can't imagine how my feelings churn! Especially after pumpkin mush," Oska said.

Dina hugged him and said he hadn't really understood, but no matter. The argument continued. Our aunts said that they had long since given up, as far as we were concerned, that we had come completely under the influence of the street and Bolshevism which, to their minds, was one and the same thing. They went on to say such awful things it made Dina stand up and slap her hand loudly on the table. Her face became flushed.

"I think I forgot to mention the fact that I've joined the Party," she said.

"Are you as good as a Communist now?" Oska inquired.

"I hope so," she replied cheerfully.

My aunts were flabbergasted. They gaped. Then their mouths shut slowly.

FEKTISTKA'S OTHER NAME

"My dear kinsmen," Dina said soon after. "Great vistas have opened up before you. They are a challenge to your boundless energy and imagination. But you must be social beings, dear kinsmen. It's high time you were!" She had just been appointed Commissar Chubarkov's assistant, in charge of the children's library and reading-room.

My aunts' definition of a children's library was: an officially operated hotbed of infectious diseases which were to be found lurking in profusion in the old books, as worn and torn as a ragman's clothes.

Dina's idea of a children's library was as follows: "It's not merely a counter, kinsmen. It's not merely a place where books are handed out. A children's library should be the main centre for educating and bringing up children outside the school. It'll be the children's favourite clubhouse, where each can do as he likes. We'll teach children to respect good books. Oh, kinsmen, we'll have such a wonderful place! Your Schwambrania won't even hold a candle to it! Everyone will want to belong to it. Just wait and see."

However, in order to become such a wonderful place, the library had to have more space. There were some very rich people living in the adjoining apartment. They had been asked to move some time before, and now Dina decided to take matters into her own hands. She asked me to come along and back her up.

This would be the beginning of my volunteer work for the library.

Dina was busy checking the catalogue and library cards when I came in. She was surrounded by raggedy children. I recognized many of my former neighbourhood enemies. There were also some skinny children who lived near the railroad tracks, some stocky boys and girls from the fishermen's settlement, and some boys who worked at the cannery and the bone-meal factory. Some were filling in the cards, others were pasting torn pages, while still others were on the step ladders, placing the books on the shelves. Everyone was busy and you could see they were enjoying the job. This was the first children's book brigade. They obviously liked Dina and kept pestering her with questions.

"Donna Dina! Donna Dina! Who's Uncle Tom's cabin?" a little girl wrapped in a huge shawl that was crossed on her chest and tied in back asked.

"Donna Dinovna!" came a voice from the top of a ladder. "Is Tolstoy a place or a someone?"

"Here's another helper, children," Dina said, pointing to me. "Put his name down on the list, Ukhorskov."

I was very offended. I had no intention of playing second fiddle here. I had been positive Dina had intended me to be in charge of everything. However, I decided to say nothing for the time being.

"I know you. You're the doctor's son. Won't you get in trouble for coming here with us?" somebody said.

"Why should I get in trouble? Everybody's equal now."

Ukhorskov, a tall boy with high cheekbones, came over to me. "Are you going to be a doctor, too?" he said.

"No. I'm going to be a sailor of the revolution." "That's not bad. I want to be an aviator."

Commissar Chubarkov came in just then. We hadn't seen each other for a long time. "Oho! The younger generation's shooting up! What does your papa write home about life in the trenches?"

Then we all trooped next door to help with the eviction. To my horror and embarrassment the people were close relatives of Taya Opilova. She was sitting on a trunk in the front hall when we entered. For a moment I did not know what to say. Taya's eyes were full of contempt, indignation, reproach and God knows what else. My one desire was to sneak off.

"I thought you were the doctor's son!" she said.

"I'd rather be a doctor's son than an exploiter's daughter!" I snapped. "That's that!" the commissar shouted. "You've had your say and that's that." Ukhorskov came over to me. He spoke in a whisper. "We're putting out a newspaper. Come on over this evening. You can be the editor. You've changed a lot. You've got a real fighting spirit now." "How come you know me?"

"You don't recognize me, do you? Remember the time I fixed your basin and pail? I'm Fektistka. I live in the children's home now. I requisitioned my boss' tools and I make nifty cigarette lighters. Want me to make you one that'll look just like a pistol? And it'll be a good lighter, too?"

"I don't smoke."

"You can use it to scare thugs."

As I looked at this tall, confident boy I could hardly recognize the tinsmith's timid apprentice. Could this be the same Fektistka whose skinny back had first brought home to us the difference between those who made things and those who owned them? Indeed, he had even acquired a last name!

The Commissar was waiting for me outside the library. He took my arm. "Uh, is Comrade Dina ... uh, a relative of yours?" He was trying to sound indifferent. "Is she your sister?"

"Yes. We're related." I was very possessive. Then I turned into the wind so the Commissar wouldn't hear me and added, "She's my cousin."

"She's really educated." For some reason or other he sounded sad.

"She sure is! She nearly practically graduated from the University."

He sighed.

CITIZENS OF A NEW LAND

No! I was not elected editor of the children's newspaper. Horrible old Dina told them I wasn't ready to take on such a job yet, since I liked to daydream and wasn't sufficiently politically conscious, or some such nonsense. I had never expected anything like that from her. And so Klavdia was elected editor. Yes, the very same Klavdia who had always been our prisoner when Oska and I played war in Schwambrania.

"I know what Comrade Dina means," Klavdia said slyly. "He's still making-believe he's in a place called Schwambrania. It's a game. They used to take me prisoner. But it's no fun to play that any more."

The kids all looked at me and smiled. Strangely, they were friendly smiles. Never before had I been so ashamed of Schwambrania.

"I guess you've changed places now, Klavdia. You're in charge from now on, and you've been freed for good. But Lelya 's still a prisoner of Schwambrania. My poor kinsman." Dina smiled.

Naturally, I should have got up and walked out on those smart alecks, but at that moment I doubted Schwambrania's right to existence more than ever before. I felt there was nothing I could say in its defence. The game was obviously becoming outdated. It was like an obsession, something to be ashamed of, like a habit you want to break. Klavdia, the new editor, came over to me and said,

"Don't be mad. Say 'fins' and come out of prison."

She was a thin and lively girl, and it was as clear as day that she had no use for a game like Schwambrania. That was when I mentally crossed out Item 3, the last on our list of the world's injustices, the one entitled "Landless children". I wanted to belong to the same country she did, and so I stayed on.

I was completely engrossed in the busy, noisy affairs of the library, spending all my free time there. My hands and clothes were full of paint, paste and ink. I was piled high with folders and obligations. Oska tagged along and was soon everyone's pet. He was put in charge of the chess table. "And chairs" he added, after he had been elected.

Ukhorskov, Klavdia and I organized a literary club. A month later the first issue of our magazine appeared. It was called *Bold Thinking*. I signed my name as the editor-in-chief. We hardly visited the alchemist any more, for we were too busy at the library. In the evenings everyone gathered in the reading room, and the day's newspapers were read aloud. This was really "news", real dispatches from the front lines. Stepan Atlantis and perhaps my father were somewheres out there, and thus were also part of these dispatches.

We had lectures, literary debates and evening and morning social events, at which both actors and audience were equally thrilled. The library's fame spread throughout Pokrovsk. Every day new boys and girls would come in from the outskirts.

We wore out our shoes and the thresholds of the various organizations in an effort to supply the library with kerosene and firewood. Dina and her aide, Zorka, a shy and gentle girl, made terrible scenes at the city council, arguing over every stick of firewood. Once, when there was not enough wood to last out the month, we all donated whatever we could. Small frozen children brought a board, a panel of a chest or an armful of sticks, despite the fact that there was no firewood at home. Still, they brought the wood to the library. Once again hot flames made the stove doors rattle. In the evening the young readers would take their eyes from their books to listen to their wood crackling triumphantly in the stove, to see the victorious array of bright sparks. Each would look around possessively at the bookcases, the tables and his neighbours, for each felt himself the master here. The merry crackling of the stove drowned out the churning of their empty stomachs.

Chubarkov would stop by for new books practically every day. He was an avid reader and attended all of our plays, debates and literary evenings. His loud applause inspired us. He, however, was mostly inspired by Dina's presence. Dina, as he put it, had a great cultural influence on him. Irresponsible people said he was simply in love. But that didn't concern us.

OUR ORDINARY EARTH

In the midst of all our work we decided to set an evening aside for a gala performance. The children invited their parents. We had a general housecleaning in the library, got rid of the cobwebs and hung new posters on the walls. For some reason or other, only mothers came to the party. They were given the best seats. They fixed their combs and hid their work-weary hands under the fronts of their shawls. Dina and Zorka offered them tea without sugar, but there was apple butter.

A very new feeling of being a part of things and wanting to prepare a very special welcome, to be especially hospitable to the guests, prompted Oska and me to make a real sacrifice.

I put on my coat and was about to dash back home.

"Going for the Schwambranian sugar?" he said, guessing my intentions.

"Yes!"

Dina was really touched. I imagined what Stepan Atlantis would have said, had he been there.

"See, Stepan, I'm donating all our sweet private property for the good of everybody," I would say.

"Good for you! That's exactly how a sailor of the revolution should act," he would reply.

Our hearts nearly burst from pride as we watched the mothers drinking their tea with Schwambrania's sugar.

The performance was Act Two of Nikolai Gogol's play *The Marriage*.

"Just look at my boy," one of our mothers was saying. "Why, you'd think he was a real dandy!"

"Goodness! Is that Annie? I swear it is. You'd never recognize her in that get-up."

"There's Nina! Look at her. I never knew she could be so high and mighty."

"Who's the skinny boy? The doctor's son? I might have guessed. He speaks so politely."

"My Serge learned his part so good he's saying it faster'n anybody. What a rascal! The boy in the booth there can hardly keep up to tell him what's next."

"Where's your boy, Stepanida?"

"You can't see him. He's holding the curtain."

The play was a smashing success. The actors were smothered in the motherly embraces of the audience. Next on the program was Oska, reciting a piece from *The Sorochinskaya Fair*.

The audience sat back expectantly.

"Do you know what the Ukrainian night is like?" Oska began with great feeling.

"No! No, we don't! Tell us!" came several voices from the audience.

"No, you do not know what it is like," he continued, obviously startled by the response.

"Of course we don't," the mothers replied. "How could we? We never had time for book-learning."

Afterwards the children took their mothers on a tour of inspection, showing them their drawings, posters, magazines and the bulletin board with newspaper clippings.

"They've got themselves a whole kingdom of their own here!" one of the women exclaimed.

Then there were games and dancing. At first, the women stood along the walls shyly, but Dina and Zorka pulled them into the middle of the room. I played a lively folk dance, four-handed, counting Oska's two, and the room began to spin like a huge top. We had had many children's parties and birthday parties at home, but none had ever been as much fun as this.

"Thank you, Donna Dinovna," the beaming mothers said. "And you, Zorka dear. And you, boys and girls. Our youth's gone and past, with no good times to remember. But at least we've lived to see our children happy. Thank you."

"You should thank yourselves. You made all this possible," Dina replied.

Saucy Klavdia dragged me off to the "Surprise Room". One corner of the room was hidden by some very nice drapes. The sign above them read: "Panorama. View of a Moonlit Winter's Night".

"Want a look?" she said. "Pay a forfeit."

I paid a forfeit.

Klavdia turned down the lamp. "Look!" She pulled the drapes apart.

I saw a gold frame. Within it was a beautifully made scene of a winter's night. The moon's milky-blue beams illuminated it. The granaries of Pokrovsk had been copied very well. The tall water-tower was set in the middle of the deserted square. Red lights glowed in the windows of the tiny houses.

"Doesn't it look real?"

"Yes," I breathed. "I think it's even prettier than if it was real. Who did it?"

"Dina. And she said to be sure I showed it to you." Klavdia was laughing. "Now look!"

Suddenly, I saw a little horse and wagon moving across the panorama. At that instant the toy night dissolved, the perspective became deeper, the granaries took on their usual size, and I realized that there was no panorama. The gilt frame had been set in a large window that faced on the square. I had been looking out at an ordinary night in the real town of Pokrovsk. I never would have dreamed that this beautiful night scene and our wonderful party could have taken place on our ordinary earth. A mist of cheap tinfoil shrouded Schwambrania. The earth of Schwambrania was slipping away from under me. At that very moment I heard mocking laughter. I looked around. Dina was standing there, surrounded by a crowd of boys and girls.

"Well? Do you realize now that you need a gold frame to turn Pokrovsk into Schwambrania?"

They laughed. Oska came over to me and took my hand. We stood thus, surrounded by the laughing children. Fektistka Ukhorskov was laughing. Klavdia was laughing. Just as Oska and I were about to join in the general merriment at the expense of the Big Tooth Continent, the hot blood of true Schwambranians rushed to our heads. How dared they mock us!

"Did you guess what the trick is?" Dina asked. We said nothing. "Then I'll tell you. It's all a matter of the old saying being true: the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. But a well-known Communist writer once said: the proletariat doesn't have to build castles in the air, because it can and is building its kingdom on earth. That's why we had a proletarian revolution. To make the grass greener on our side."

In the applause that followed I heard the echoes of disenchanted Schwambrania's fall.

Oska and I, still holding hands, stalked out of the rollicking room.

"Where are you going?"

"Are your Schwambranian feelings hurt?"

"Never mind, they'll come back," Dina said. "Hey, kinsmen, wait a minute! Never mind, they'll come back. They'll come back to work and not to play at make-believe."

THE YO-HO-HO INVASION

Revolutionary humanity, according to rumour, had another very dangerous enemy besides Chatelains Urodenal, my aunts and the real, live Admiral Kolchak. This was the Yo-ho-ho Gang. They came from Atkarskaya, Petrovskaya and Saratovskaya streets. Red-headed Vaska Kandrash (Kandrashov) was the gang leader, but Hefty Martynenko, my overgrown former classmate, provided the real leadership.

"Yo-ho-ho! Yo-ho-ho! Nobody can scare us, ho!" was their war-cry as they made the rounds of their domain.

The children's library did not escape attack. They came on a Sunday, a week before Oska and I walked out. There were about fifteen of them and they advanced in a close and wary bunch. Vaska Kandrash was in the lead. He walked over to Donna Dina's desk and said,

"Find me a nice snappy book. I want a real interesting one. You got one by Louis Boussenard? No? How about Nat Pinkerton? Not him neither? Some Soviet library you got here!"

"We don't have silly books like that. But we do have books that are a lot more interesting. I can see you boys have a real fighting spirit. The way things are run here, every reader is in charge of the library. Would you like to be our fighting squad and keep order in the reading room and guard our book exhibit? There are a lot of ruffians who tear the books and mess the place up. I know I'll be able to rely on you."

This was most unexpected. The Yo-ho-hos were taken aback. The gang members exchanged glances.

"I'll bet you're the commander," Dina continued, addressing Kandrash.

"Yes. I am." He was flattered. "How'd you guess?" "That's common knowledge. Well, what do you say? Can I rely on you to keep order here?"

Once again the Yo-ho-hos looked uneasy.

"Sure you can. Who tramped all that snow in?" Kandrash bellowed at the members of his gang. "What's the matter? You so sick you can't bend over and brush it off your boots? Look at the mess!"

The Yo-ho-hos jostled each other as they tumbled out into the hall and wiped their feet. Then they hung their hats on the pegs.

Hefty could not forgive the gang for this betrayal. He caught up with me one day as I was passing the library. He was furious, for he felt I was chiefly

responsible for the Yo-ho-hos changing sides. He grabbed my coat and lifted me off the ground. The conversation was more than brief.

"You?"

"Yes!"

"Ahhh!"

When I was finally able to open my eyes again a fight was raging. Ukhorskov and the Yo-ho-hos were closing in on Hefty. I dashed into the fray. They accepted me as one of them.

"All of you to one?" Hefty roared.



"No! All of us for one!" the boys replied and went on socking him.

Never before had Hefty been so badly beaten. I knew why he was being hit. He was a real and vicious enemy, no matter that he may have been a rip-roaring fellow. He was getting what was coming to him. The line that divided the world into two camps had become very clear to me. Hefty was on the other side. I was here, with the boys whom I had come back to from Schwambrania. I was let in on the fight and hit Hefty with real pleasure. I pummelled him on my own behalf and on behalf of Stepan Atlantis. I socked him like a runaway Schwambranian and pounded him like a sailor of the revolution. And we did him up fine.

GREAT NEWS.

I was jubilant as I returned from the battlefield. My head was spinning, a result of our victory and the hard wallop delivered by Hefty. Oska met me in the front hall. " 'Hoo-ray, hoo-ray!' they all shouted, the Schwambranians," I sang.

"There's great news," Oska said in a stupid voice.

The family was gathered at the table. Misfortune lay on the table, as long as a pike.

"Papa has typhus," Mamma said in a hospital whisper. "Uralsk has been cut off. It took the telegram nine days to reach us. Maybe he's already...."

"'Hoo-ray, hooray!' They were clouted!"

I was given some water. I got up from the floor unaided.

We had no word of Papa in the two weeks that followed. For two weeks we did not know whether we should speak of him as someone who was alive, or as someone who had died. For two weeks we were afraid to mention him, for we did not know whether to use the present or the past tense.

It was during those difficult days that we learned Stepan had been killed. Stepan Gavrya, the boy who had wanted to find the lost Atlantis, had died a hero's death. There were various versions of what had happened. Volodya Labanda said a Red Army man had told him that the whiteguards had taken Stepan prisoner. As he faced a firing squad he had been told,

"Stand against the wall!"

And Stepan supposedly had said, "I'm used to that. I used to stand against the wall every day in school."

Maybe Labanda invented all this. I really don't know. But I do know that Stepan Gavrya, alias Atlantis, was killed. He would never see me become a sailor of the revolution. I would not come out to welcome him in my patched felt boots, carrying rotten straw in my swollen hands. There is nothing more to write about him.

What a terrible loss.

HOMEcoming

The town became muffled under the snow like an ear that is stuffed with cotton. Snowdrifts billowed along the swollen streets. The yards brimmed over with snow like flour bins. It was cold. The grey sky drifted overhead, catching on the chimneys, where it stuck like water weeds on piles. It was cold. The drifts had laid siege to the town. Hospital trains snowbound out there in the icy, and perhaps Papa....

One train had ploughed through the drifts the previous day. I hurried to the station. The train chugged in and stopped. No one came out. It was a train of dead men. The wounded and sick had all frozen to death on the way. The bodies were stacked on the platform.

But Papa was not one of them.

It was cold. And dreary. I wanted so badly to go over to the library, to do some work with the children there, to go through the books and discuss the latest news dispatches. But I felt awkward about showing up after Schwambrania's fall. What was Schwambrania, after all? A stuffed lion. And the stuffing was dust. A party favour with no surprise inside it. Even Oska had become bored with the game.

Thus overcome by boredom, we went to see the alchemist, trudging through the snow as we made our way to the house and then down to the basement. We came upon a disgusting scene. They had apparently all had too much of the elixir. Filenkin was on the floor, out like a light. Agrippina, the wife of Schwambrania's president, was being sick in a corner. The alchemist was barely able to keep his balance on a stool.

"Want ... some elixir? It'll m-make you's happy as me." He offered me a slopping glass.

I accepted it from his unsteady hand. A nauseating smell hit me in the face. Why.... The terrible truth dawned on me: it was homebrew!

"He-he.... Yes. Natur'ly. It's homebrew. The purest kind. Eh-mew-eh.... Distilled it m'self. My ... eh ... Elixir of Schwambrania. Your Schwambrania. too ... eh-mew-eh.... It's somewhat like homebrew.... Your own invenshun, this. A dream of your own brewing...."

We ran out. Why were we so unlucky? Had we been the unwitting helpers of a moonshiner? Our own invention! Our own brewing! We were so crushed we went to bed early that night, without boat whistles or dreams. Sleep, as chilly and loose as a snowdrift, enveloped us.

There was a loud knocking on the door in the middle of the night. Oska slept on. I jumped out of bed. I heard my father's weak voice. He was alive! He was led up the stairs. His steps were halting. His skin was yellow. He looked like a corpse. A beard as huge as a dickey covered his chest. He took off his fur hat. Mammy rushed to him, but he shouted:

"No! Don't anyone come near me! I'm full of lice ... I have to bathe.... And eat.... Potatoes if you have any...."

His voice shook, as did his head. We started a fire in the pot-bellied stove, fried potatoes and heated coffee. We put the holiday lamp on the table. It was a real feast.

The water for his bath was ready. We went into the other room and from there could hear the creak of soap knocking against his bones. Fifteen minutes later we were called back into the room. Papa had on a clean shirt, his face was

clean, and he did not look as frightening as before. He was speaking about the situation at the front. As long as he spoke of himself, his voice was calm, though his unfamiliar beard seemed to be weighing down his words. But then suddenly he became very excited and tears rolled down his cheeks. "There were the wounded ... the dying ... lying on the floor in the corridors.... On frozen urine ... three inches high.... I'm a doctor ... I couldn't...."

Mamma tried to calm him. After a while he regained his composure. He had a cup of coffee. He was home again. Papa looked at me and said, "You've grown a mile." Then he tweaked my nose, as he always did.

"He's become unmanageable," my aunts hurried to say. "He's carried off all the books in the house for the proletarians."

"It's about time you stopped judging things the way you used to," Papa said irritably. "I can't understand how you can be so petty in times like this. If you had only seen the faces of *our* boys when they routed those.... If you had...."

We went off to bed an hour later. At last I had handed over my duties as the man of the house. I felt as though the invisible belt that had been holding me in all this time had been let out, and I could suddenly breathe easily again.

I fell headlong onto my bed and sobbed deliciously into my pillow. I was bewailing Papa's typhus, my own state of nervous tension, the Red Army men of the Urals Front, poor Stepan, the injustice of the homebrew incident and much, much more. But not one of these tears would fall upon the soil of Schwambrania. I decided to return to the library the next morning.

FIRE AND ASHES

The armoured train burst upon the city. From the railroad station it had been shunted onto a spur line that ran within the city limits, past all the old granaries, and was known as the Granary Line.

Thus, the armoured train clanged along the Granary Line, thrusting its guns impolitely and warningly into the faces of Breshka Street and the flour dealers' warehouses. The mottled, camouflaged sides of the armoured cars were battle-scarred. The locomotive was the most badly battered, for its whole front section had been mangled. Clad in its dirty-green coat of mail, it resembled a huge and angry lobster with a missing claw. After it had towed the armoured cars to the spur line, it backed away to the railroad station to undergo repairs.

Meanwhile, we were again busy drawing posters in the library, an assignment given to us by the Commissar. The slogan was:

Help combat typhus!

Once again we spared neither paint nor effort and adorned our pictures of the terrible lice with a staggering number of legs and feelers. Once again strange

centipedes crawled across our frightening posters. Underneath we strung the lines of a poem of our own that had by now become implanted in our minds:

*When all is neat and clean
No louse is ever seen.*

The project was completed a few days later. We wanted to give the posters to the Commissar, but I was told he was at a meeting in the armoured train. I decided to take them there. The train was like a silent ironclad, moored in a dead end.

"Where do you think you're going?" a sentry called out.

"To see Commissar Chubarkov. I have some posters for him." I did not feel in the least bit shy.

"Let's see them." I unrolled the posters and the sentry examined them closely. "They look fine. True to life. All right, go on in."

I entered the car softly. No one noticed me. The air was full of cigarette smoke. The head of the Cheka was there, and the Commissar, and a lot of other people. It was as dim and as close as a vault. The atmosphere was tense. The heavy armour that covered the car pressed upon everyone. A very thin man dressed in leather pants and a short sheepskin coat was speaking.

"As the commander of the train, I want to say that the men, the guns and the ammunition are in readiness. We're being delayed, because the locomotive is being repaired. The railroad men are holding us up."

"Then there's nothing more to say. We'll wait till we hear from them. Robilko's due any minute. He'll tell us how things are. The only thing I want is some sleep. I haven't had any sleep for four nights," the Cheka Chairman said.

"What if it's not the locomotive?" the Commissar said and puffed hard on his cigarette, flicking the ash on the table angrily.

"Listen, friend," the commander of the armoured train said, "let's keep this place clean. Don't drop ashes all over. See how neat everything is? We even got an ashtray to keep it this way. The boys traded it someplace. It's a funny-looking thing. So put your ashes in it." And he pushed something strange over to the commissar. Chubarkov jabbed his butt at the opening.

"Their attack is scheduled for tomorrow," the Commissar said. "If your train doesn't shield us, they'll hit our rear. It's all a matter of repairing the engine. And what if it's not?" he repeated.

"If it isn't, I'll go over and see what it is," the Chairman said. "I'll talk to the fellows. I can vouch for the workers. They won't let us down. They're on our side. As for the foremen and mechanics.... Well, if it's sabotage, they'll be in for trouble." He rose and strode along the passage. He was a stern, determined man, so unlike what he had been when he had laughed so heartily over our Schwambranian papers. And the Commissar was different, too. This was not the

man I knew. He spoke more simply, and did not keep repeating "that's that". He spoke well. Here he was among his own people, men he could rely on completely. He was doing his job, and the great responsibility that lay upon him gripped his heart and made him clench his teeth. This was my very first encounter with the revolution in its everyday life. This was the very first time I was seeing it at close range and not from the heights of Schwambrania, not by peeking out of our doorway. This was when I realized that the job these people, whom I now saw in a new light, were doing was a difficult and dangerous one, but the only real and worthwhile job there was.

Then Robiiko rushed in. I knew him. He was a railroad engineer who had helped us get rid of the principal of the Boys School in February 1917. He now rushed into the car. Everyone jumped up.

"Well?" they all demanded.

"The railroadmen told me to give back your appeal. They said they don't need it. They said they know what the revolution means to them by heart. They pledged to do their proletarian duty. Which means they'll repair the engine by tomorrow morning, even though it means working all through the night."

The armoured train left the next day. The railroad workers' brass band played. The Commissar made a speech. The engine clanged and then steamed out of the station.

At that very moment a hand was thrust out of the loophole of the middle car. It was holding the strange ashtray I had seen the evening before and was emptying it.

The armoured train was moving. The loophole was passing me. I recognized our seashell grotto, the grotto of the Black Queen, the former hiding place of Schwambrania's secret. Butts and ashes were pouring out of it. Butts and ashes.

LAND! LAND!

A special meeting of all readers had been called in the library. We had no firewood for the coming month. The city council had said there was none to spare, and so the library would have to be closed. The commissar paced up and down glumly. We were desperate. A sudden brainstorm hit me with such force it practically blinded me and made me squint. Everyone looked at me strangely.

"Comrades! Let's use Schwambrania for firewood!"

"Schwambrania's firewood is only good for heating castles in the air. Forget it," Dina said.

"No! That's not what I meant. D'you know Uger's Mansion? It's full of old planks and logs, and what not. That was our secret place. Oska and I used to

play there. So I know. Let's all get together and fill the woodpile. To hell with Schwambrania. It's for a good cause."

At first there was silence. My suggestion had been like a bombshell. Then someone clapped. A moment later everyone was shouting, jumping, clapping. The Commissar lifted me off the floor. The ceiling seemed to be coming down on us three times in a row as we were thrown up into the air, making our hearts skip a beat. Oska and I were the heroes of the day.

"But you'll have to chase the two alphysics out first," Oska said when he had been set down again.

"Which alphysics?" Dina asked.

"Alchemists," I explained.

"That's what I meant. They're getting drunk on homebrew there."

The Commissar wrote something in his notebook and left quickly without saying a word.



Schwambrania was collapsing. Our firewood project was nearly over. A heavily-laden sleigh was pulling away. I stood in a chain of boys and girls, handing planks I received from the boy on my right to the boy on my left. The planks seemed to undergo a change in my hands, for I was given pieces of Schwambrania, but I handed over ordinary firewood for our library. We were working well. My scratched hands and arms ached. The frost hurt my skin through the holes in my mittens, but it was good to feel that the boy on my left was as closely linked to me as I was to the boy on my right, while he, in turn, was to the one of his right, and so on down the line. I was a step in a live ladder. The make-believe land of Schwambrania was being passed along the chain to be burned for a good cause.

A group of boys, the Commissar, Zorka, Dina and Ukhorsky were pulling down the rickety wall of the high gallery. Suddenly, someone screamed: "Stop! Wait!"

We all looked up. There, on the very top of the swaying gallery, we spotted Oska. He had just got there and seemed quite unconcerned. "It's so beautiful up here," he called down. "I can see way far off."

"Down! Get down this minute!" the Commissar croaked. "No! Wait! Don't move! I'll get you down myself." He swung up as nimbly as a cat, climbing through the gaping holes of the floors. The gallery creaked threateningly. Then he appeared in the top window.

"Be careful!" we called.

By now he had climbed out onto the ledge. He was gripping the crumbling edge of the window frame with one hand and running his other over the wall, seeking something to hold on to. He inched along the ledge until he had nearly reached Oska.

"Shh! Stand still. Don't move," he kept saying.

"Look, isn't it nice to look down from here?" Oska spoke calmly as he waited for the Commissar.

"Give me your hand, and that's that!" Chubarkov growled as he stretched his hand towards Oska. He grabbed him and pulled him in through the window. A moment later the gallery collapsed, coming down with a great roar like an avalanche and raising clouds of snow.

"You sure would have spoiled everything," the Commissar said as he set Oska down.

The ruins of Schwambrania lay all about us.

"The Schwambranians perished like goggle and mangle," Oska said unexpectedly.

"I think you mean like Gog and Magog," Donna Dina said and smiled.

I stood among the phantom bodies, among the remains of the unborn citizens. I stood there as a general stands on a battlefield.

"Listen, comrades. I've just made up the last Schwambranian poem," I said and recited:

*I stand upon the battlefield,
Schwambrania's fate has now been sealed.
Perished all, and many more:
Jack, Pafnuti, Brenabor,
Ardelar, Urodenal,
Satanrex, the admiral.
Death-Cap-Poison-Emir, too.
That's that! They're through!
A glorious list of rare old names.*

*Farewell, Schwambrania, land of fame!
Down to work now, everyone,
Till the job is really done.
Tales are dust, tales are naught,
What is real is better wrought!
Life holds joy for me and you....
That's that! Adieu!*

A CHAPTER CONCERNING THE GLOBE

BY WAY OF AN EPILOGUE

The story's over. This is the end of the book.

But wait a minute! I'll pick up the globe. It's round and true, and I want to take my bearing. The coloured sphere spins on its base as if it were a bubble blown out of the black stem. But it lacks the brilliant shimmering and the readiness to burst at a moment's notice that is a part of every soap bubble. The globe is solid, steady and ponderable.

It can be picked up like a lamp or a cup.

Oska and I were both bookworms. Our respect for the globe was excessive. We never grabbed it by the stand, but always picked it up carefully. It rested in our hands, nestling in the reverence bred by our elders who spoke about "all is vanity" and "there is greatness in small things". It looked bold, significant and even terrible, like Yorick's skull held by Hamlet's probing fingers.

"I know how people guessed the Earth was round," Oska said after he had become convinced that his version of the place where the Earth curved was unscientific. "It's because the globe is ... spherical. That's why, isn't it, Lelya?"

We would probably have grown up to increase the number of the well-known type of human being, the person who learns the Earth is round by looking at a school globe, who fishes in a fishbowl, who watches life go by through his window and learns the meaning of hunger when his doctor puts him on a diet.

Our thanks to the epoch! The way of life of callous hardened rear ends was blasted. It was a crushing blow. And we had to learn the hard way that the Earth was round.

As for the globe, we have long since learned its true use and purpose: it is not a revelation, it is simply a visual aid. The sphere turns. Oceans and continents pass in review. There is no Schwambrania. Nor can one find Pokrovsk now. The city has been renamed Engels.

I visited the city recently. I went there to congratulate Oska on the occasion of the birth of his daughter. When I received the telegram in Moscow I must confess I was overcome by an attack of former Schwambranian pride. I went as far as to prepare a grandiloquent speech (O, daughter of the Land that Never Was! O, daughter of a doughty Schwambranian!) I even thought of a number of fine-sounding names for her: Schwambraena, Brenabora, Delyara.... But then I received a letter from Oska which read, in part: "Enough is enough! We created more than enough imaginary idiots. My daughter is real, and I don't want to hear a word about Schwambranians or Caldonians. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I've named her Natalia. All the best to you,

Your brother Oska."

Once again I was home in Pokrovsk. We were in the very same room from which, twelve years before, I had exited, my stride that of a man of the house. The stand-in for our famous Black Queen was now tucked away in the chess table. I looked for and found the scratches on the piano lid that had been made in the Tratrchok. Six-months-old Nata stared at me in round-eyed wonder.

I gave her a rattle with a long handle that was made to resemble a globe.

Our grey-haired father returned from inspecting an outlying district. Mamma had just finished conducting a lesson for a group of illiterate women. They were learning to read and write. A warm family reunion awaited us. Oska arrived from Saratov late that evening. He was curly-haired, hoarse and manly-looking.

"Lelya! I barely managed to get away. I lectured to shipbuilders in the morning and at a technical school in the afternoon. From there I went to the district committee. I'm just back from a meeting of rivermen. I spoke on the revolution in Spain. How do you like Nata?"

At this I made my emotional cradle speech of welcome: "0, you," I said, "you who," I said.

"That's enough," Oska said. "That's enough of your hamadryads."

"It's about time you knew the difference between a hamadryad and a madrigal!" I cried.

"Ah! It's that old childish habit of mine of getting words mixed up. By the way, can you tell me the difference between a dragoman and a mandragora?"

I then read the family this book. It was not the usual kind of author-reads-his-book evening, for the characters of story kept interrupting me. They would become offended over something, or feel proud. They added things, protested about others, argued with the author and forgave him.

Meanwhile, Nata was busy chewing on the globe-rattle. The descendant of Schwambranians rattled her small mace.

"I'll tell you what I think of the book," Oska said in a very formal tone of voice. "It rightly presents us as insignificant and silly fools. The author has successfully exposed the silliness of such daydreaming. Unfortunately, however, he has not been able to avoid a petty-bourgeois vagueness in some of the characterizations. However, while exposing the insignificance and silliness of those Schwambranian daydreams, you've gone a bit too far. You want to deprive the present of the right to dream. That's wrong! I think this should be changed. Wait..." He dumped the contents of his briefcase onto the table, and books and notepads, squirmed out of it like fish out of a creel. Among them I saw a small book entitled "A Communist's Companion" and recalled the deceased Jack, the Sailor's Companion.

"Here it is," he said, opening a pad. "Here's a quotation from Lenin I copied out:

" 'And if they say: what is it to us? After all, we don't need any illusions or tricks to sustain our enthusiasm.... This is our great joy. But does this mean that we ... don't need to dream? A class that is in power, a class that is truly changing the world in a workaday way is always given to realism, but it is also given to romanticism.'

"Here, you see, one should understand this romanticism to mean what Lenin meant when he spoke of a dream. And this is no longer an imaginary star that can never be reached. It's not something to console your imagination. It's our own very real Five-Year Plan, and all the ones that'll follow. It's our determination to move on despite all obstacles. It is that 'practical idealism' which Engels said the materialists had so much of when the narrow materialists accused him of 'narrowness and excessive soberness of mind'. You should have said something about that in the book," my learned brother concluded.

"I know there's a lot that can be improved," I said humbly. "I feel it, but don't know how to do it yet. And don't rush me. A person has to digest all this first. I'm not happy about being Jack, the Communists' Companion. I don't want to be just a companion. I want to be a sailor of the revolution, and I will be one, I promise you, my brother and communist, as I would have said to Stepan Atlantis."

Oska and I stayed up talking late into the night. Everyone had gone to bed. Speaking in whispers made our throats itch, as did our recollections. We lined the characters of the book up for a last review. We held a roll call of my old class at school.

"Vyacheslav Alipchenko!" I said.

"Died of typhus," Oska replied.

"Sergei Aleferenko?" I asked.

"Party Secretary of the wharves."

"Stepan Gavrya, alias Atlantis!"

"Killed in action on the Urals Front."

"Konstantin Rudenko, alias Beetle!"

"Lecturer in analytical mechanics."

" Vladimir Labanda!"

"Shipbuilding engineer."

"Martynenko, alias Hefty!"

"Exiled for counter-revolutionary activities."

"Ivan Novik!"

"Director of a machine and tractor station."

"Kuzma Murashkin!"

"First mate on the *Gromoboi*."

"Arkady Portyanko!"

"Botanist and scholar."

"Grigory Fyodorov!"

"Red Army commander."

"Nikolai Shalferov!"

"Killed by counter-revolutionaries."

The next morning Father took me to the suburbs to see the new hospital. I couldn't recognize the city. At the place where the Earth curved there was a wonderful recreation park. Homes for workers of the meat-packing plant were going up on the side of our destroyed Schwambranian mansion that had once belonged to Uger. A bus passed. Students of the city's three colleges were hurrying to their classes. Large new houses lined Breshka Street. Airplanes roared over the city, but I didn't see anyone look up. A new theatre, clinic and library were under construction. A magnificent sports stadium crowned the top of the hill. I recalled the two Schwambranians' visits to the Cheka and the Chairman's words:

"And we'll have paved streets everywhere, and big muscles, and movies every day."

While the story was in the telling, the deed was done. The clear windows, spotless floors and shiny instruments of the new hospital dazzled me.

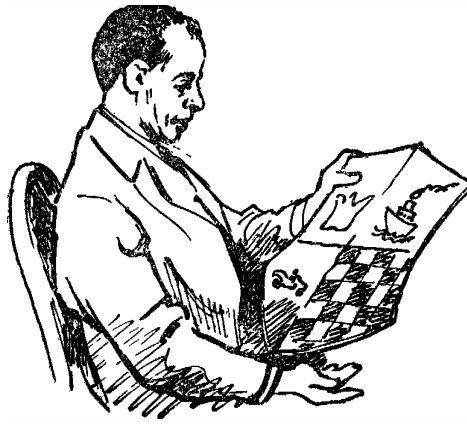
"Well? Was there anything remotely like this in Schwambrania?" Papa said, enjoying my admiring glances.

"No. Nothing of the kind."

Papa beamed.

The day before we were to leave for Moscow Mamma went to the closet that housed our family treasures and pulled out a large shield with the coat-of-arms of Schwambrania on it. It now adorns the wall of my study and is a taunting and devilish reminder of our errors and our Schwambranian imprisonment. Thus, according to legend, did Prince Oleg of yore hang his shield upon the gates of Constantinople as a constant reminder to the conquered Greeks.

But the globe has spun full circle. There is no Schwambrania. The story, too, has come full circle. It is not a revelation, but simply a visual aid.



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